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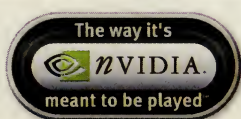




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Blueprint

The Force Is Strong With This One

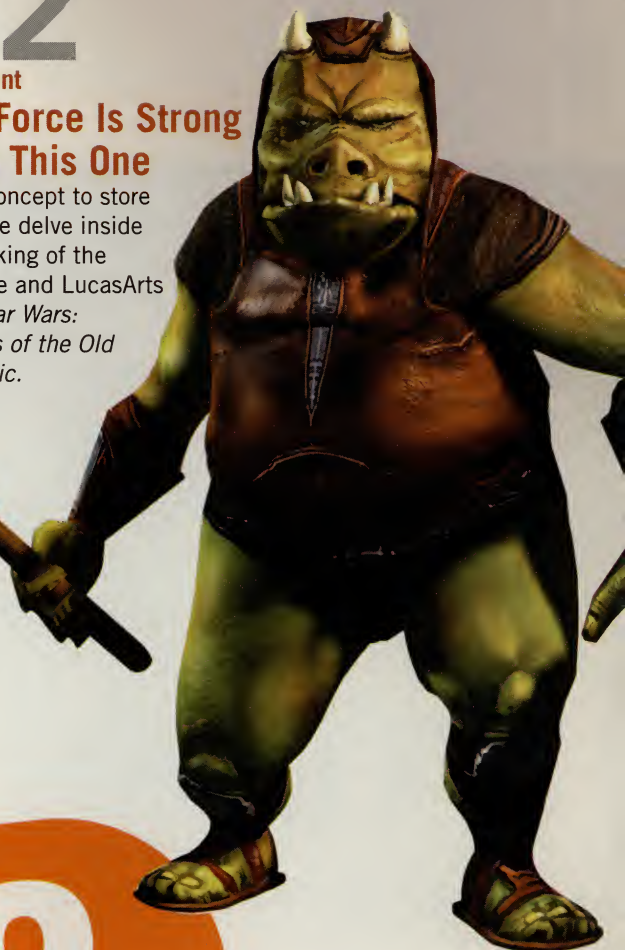
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A Year of Almosts

As this is the premiere issue, I would be remiss if I didn't expound upon the glory and the way that is *SURGE*—The Pulse of Gaming. But frankly, I'm on the editorial staff, not the sales team. I could sit here and masturbate writing about our hot new 'zine, but we'll just let the magazine speak for itself. And now on to the reason we're all here in the first place—the games.

At the start of the year, the 2003 game lineup looked as if it could do no wrong. Gamers across the country were salivating for some of the most highly anticipated sequels in gaming history: *Halo 2*, *Doom III*, and *Half-Life 2*. Then something strange happened: One by one, the titles fell into limbo, only to reappear slated for a 2004 release.

The first was *Halo 2*. In March Bungie pushed the game back to make sure it kicked ass to its full potential. A July Activision conference call revealed that id Software was taking leeway with the release date of *Doom III*—an expected move from one of the most detail-oriented development teams. Two down.

Then, some bastard hackers preyed upon Valve's network insecurities and walked away with a significant portion of the *Half-Life 2* source code, pushing the game to an April release (for an interview with *Half-Life 2*'s creators, Valve Software, turn to page 66). Many of us started to wonder what we'd done to offend the gaming gods.

Though 2003 has had its good moments, with titles like *Knights of the Old Republic* and *Call of Duty*, our wish list for 2004 looks eerily similar to our wish list for 2003. Let's just hope the games stay on course for the rest of their development.

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Though we count on getting several letters chastising us for not rating a game high or low enough, we'd like to skip the petty complaints and use the Lobby for a discussion board covering the issues affecting the gaming community. With this in mind, chew on these talking points and give us your take.

Should Nintendo Pull a Sega?

Once the infallible king of the video game industry, some have suggested that Nintendo go the way of Sega and concentrate on bringing its strong first-party titles to multiple consoles instead of continuing to settle for financial and technological inferiority to Microsoft and Sony.

While the PS2 and Xbox have made strides with deep online content and hard drive storage, Nintendo wants everyone to get a GBA to unlock special features in their GameCube games. Is this a sound strategy? Do you think Nintendo has a bright future, or do you think the end of the Nintendo console is drawing near?

Half-Life 2 Source Code: A Leaky Valve?

In the aftermath of Valve's source code leak, everyone had an opinion as to what really happened. Some industry insiders we spoke with believed this must have been an inside job because the game wasn't close to being finished on time and they needed a legitimate reason to delay the game again. Others contested that there was no way this could be the case, because Valve must now rewrite much of their anti-cheating code for the multiplayer, a daunting task that no one would want to undergo twice. What is your take?

A Question of Length

So you buy a game or two a month—how many do you actually finish? How many games that you leave by the wayside do you come back to? With so many games being published a year, does a shorter game constitute a better experience, or does nothing less than 30 hours justify forking over your hard-earned cash?

Convergence Vs. Console

By now you've all heard of the PSX—a PS2 on steroids featuring a 120GB hard drive, built-in Ethernet port, DVD recorder, and a TV/broadcast tuner. It looks sleek and the features sound great, but do you really need your console to do the job of your TiVo, PC, and DVD player? What is your take on convergence, and which of these features do you hope to find in your next console?

Do you have an opinion on these hot topics or on *SURGE*'s first issue? Please write to letters@surgemag.com.

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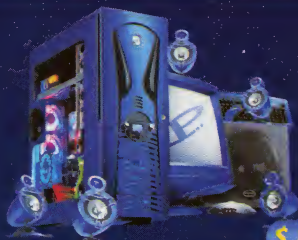
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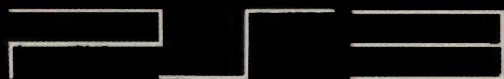
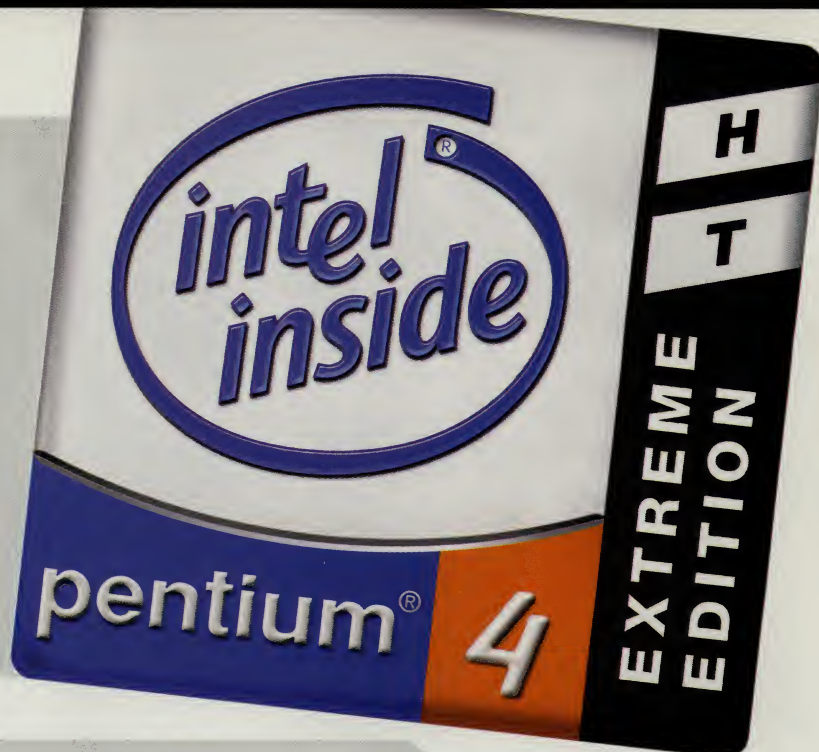
The Gamer's Processor

Targeting gamers and PC enthusiasts, Intel has announced plans for a new version of the Pentium 4 CPU. The Pentium 4 Extreme Edition runs at 3.2 GHz, the fastest speed currently available in the Pentium 4 line. The processor will include Intel's Hyper-Threading technology, which allows multiple applications to run more efficiently simultaneously so you can frag and stream MP3s at the same time.

Perhaps in response to AMD's Athlon 64 CPU, Intel is releasing a number of products specifically targeting high-end gamers. These include their all-in-one LCD Media Center and the 815 Digital Set Top Box Reference Design, which allows for high-quality streaming video over a broadband connection.

The Extreme Edition's 2MB of on-chip L3 cache means it's comparable to Intel's Xeon MP, a processor reserved for high-end, multiprocessor servers.

—Tal Pinchevsky



PS3 Buzz

We're still a ways off from the launch of PlayStation 3. Nevertheless, developers in all fields have already started jockeying for position to get in on a slice of the PS3 pie. What we do know, as Sony Computer Entertainment has already revealed, is that PS3, expected to make its auspicious debut sometime in 2005, will be backwards-compatible with games for PS2 and PSone.

Meanwhile, a large handful of developers and publishers have already started collaboration on PlayStation 3 games. Since games typically take between a year and a year and a half to design, it does make sense to start early. Rumors abound that THQ, Activision, Electronic Arts, Take-Two, and Capcom have already started looking into design for next-generation games. Rockstar is also believed to have started working on a next-generation version of *Grand Theft Auto*.

—TP

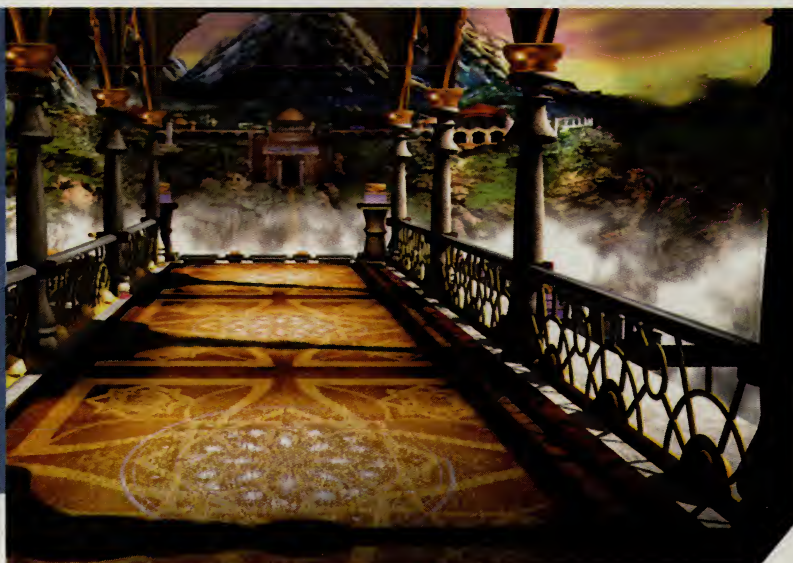
Feel the Love

In what could be a boon for both the gaming and wellness industries, a Colorado startup known as the Wild Divine Project released *The Journey to Wild Divine* for Mac and PC on November 1. *The Journey* is being billed as an "interactive" gaming experience, measuring heart rate and other functions through a unique human-computer interface in what appears to be the first video game designed for hippies and New Agers.

Through sensors attached to your fingertips, gamers will be able to navigate through palaces and forests using their vital signs, such as skin response and pulse rate.

Realistic 3D graphics and a new-age soundtrack from roots-rocker Chris Berry make this an innovative, if odd, game. Don't be surprised if you smell of granola and patchouli after your first time playing.

—TP





Founding Fathers

In the beginning, nerds made video games; as time went on they became cool. Or such is the argument presented by Brad King and John Borland in *Dungeons and Dreamers: The Rise of Computer Game Culture from Geek to Chic*, published by McGraw Hill.

The book delivers a quick recap of the history of computer games, all of which centers around the experiences of Ultima founder Richard Garriott (a.k.a. Lord British), a firsthand participant in the birth and growth of game culture to its contemporary status as worldwide cultural phenomenon.

They have a point—developers and gamers are no longer a bunch of hunch-backed outcasts gathering around the warm glow of their televisions in dark basements. Well, at least not all of them: Atlanta Falcons QB Michael Vick and most other NFL players are hardcore gamers. Dave Grohl of Foo Fighters and Nirvana fame has been known to throw down in *PaRappa the Rapper*. The point is this tome talks about you and the history of your hobby, so check it out.

—Matt Bertz

Just a Game? Not Anymore

If you're not into Halloween and the World Series, you now have a new reason to look forward to October. Last month Major League Gaming launched its inaugural season with the MLG Tournament, as hundreds of gamers poured in from around the world to bring the pain at GameTime Nation in New York City.

The tournament kicked off with the gaming hordes competing in *Halo* (Xbox), *Madden NFL 2004* (PS2), *Gran Turismo 3* (PS2), and *Soul Calibur II* (Xbox) in early one-on-one elimination rounds. Another event featured some of the top Halo players in the country taking on courageous challengers in a series of four-on-four bouts. The prize? Cash money baby!

High scorers from the MLG Tournament will go on to compete in future events in New York, Chicago, and L.A. The first season will culminate in the MLG Championships in Las Vegas next summer.

MLG made gaming history last summer by signing a professional gamer to a management contract, along with a lucrative endorsement deal. Halo master Dustin "HP Darkman" Langton, was discovered kicking ass and taking names at halo.bungie.org, a fan site devoted to the great multiplayer FPS.

Langton will be a spokesman for LASR Accessories, makers of such fine products as the GamePak, a console-toting backpack to take your Xbox, GameCube, or PS2 everywhere. It may not have the same ring to it, but someday kids everywhere may be singing, "I wanna be like Darkman." Or maybe not. We hope not.

—David Crohn



Chasing a Phantom

Maybe Shaggy and Scooby could crack this case...



What it lacks in tangible product it makes up for with marketing overdrive. Infinium Labs, a "company" purporting to "do business" in Florida whose online-only "console," the Phantom seems to be quickly losing credibility.

Infinium CEO Tim Roberts, who we spoke to for what was to be a closer look at the Phantom and the future of network gaming, has a track record littered with bankruptcies and high cash burn-rates. As reported by the enterprising editors at Hardocp.com, the "offices" consist of a Mailboxes, Etc. P.O. box in a strip mall and a vacant office in Sarasota, Fla. The company, said to have \$25 million in venture capital, has been secretive to a fault. Maybe Dick Cheney has this reguish console at his undisclosed location, playing rounds of the Phantom-developed title Total Disinformation Awareness online with John Poindexter and Tim Roberts, all having a good laugh.

We planned an article to give you the lowdown on this random console, but ran into some serious roadblocks. Contacting the "employees" of Infinium was like working your way through *Enter the Matrix*—boring, tedious, and buggy, with frequent restarts and no payoff in the end. When we did get a hold of some people, it was like talking to a politician flooding you with a prewritten speech of empty statements and fuzzy math.

"We like to say that this company is built by gamers for gamers," said Infinium marketing director David Frederick. "We're all avid gamers, which I think, quite frankly, sets us apart from a lot of the companies out there." Yeah, that's why the first game they announced was *Carmen Sandiego*.

History has proven that the games make the consoles. Since the big publishers we questioned (EA, LucasArts, Rockstar) had the same shrug of the shoulders as the gamers curious about this thing, we knew something was amiss, and since we had no evidence of competitive game licenses for the Phantom to even bring it close to the consoles on the market, we pulled the story.

If the Phantom ever rolls out of Roberts' Longboat Key post office box, we'll be the first to send the company a big bouquet of flowers and a mix tape. Until it happens, though, we'd suggest sidestepping the company like a turd on the sidewalk.

The future of gaming is online, but we don't believe that Infinium Labs is going to lead the charge. Sony, Microsoft, and, to some extent, Nintendo all have deep, deep pockets, and could buy Infinium Labs for roughly the same amount these companies spend in catering per year. We also suspect that's basically what Roberts and his cronies were looking for: a quick burst of hype and a quick buy-out.

We hope that something comes of the Infinium hype, but this late in the game we're not expecting much. The future belongs to one of the big three, that's certain, and there's no way a punk-ass little startup is going to muscle in on Xbox Live or PlayStation 2 online territory.

Good luck, Tim Roberts, wherever you are.

—John Biggs

RETRO CHIC

It looks like it might have shipped with your first NES, but the Mad Catz RetroCON was designed with your PS2 in mind. It reeks of throwback kitch and is ergonomically deficient, but the new controller has all the buttons, sticks, and modes you'll need for a prime gaming experience.

This is to gaming what the new Mini Cooper is to the automotive industry, a striking combination of classic design and modern technology. At \$24.99, this is the gaming accessory that pays tribute to the past, commemorating the day you finally beat King Koopa and saved Princess Toadstool.

▪ Mad Catz Retro CON; \$24.99; www.madcatz.com

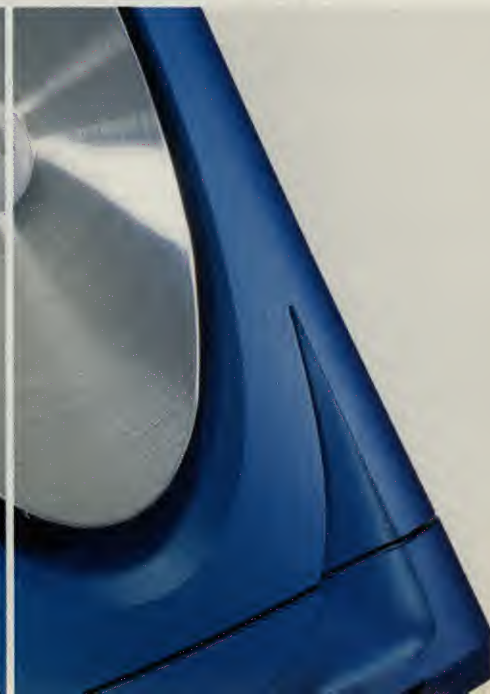


XPS: THE SEQUEL

After Alienware won hardcore gamers over with unusual colors like Martian Red and Cyborg Green, Dell stepped up to the plate with its own gaming rig, complete with a cool Venice Blue chassis. It also looks remarkably like Alienware's gear. Hmmm... Now Dell is catching up on the inside.

The XPS II's innards sport Intel's blazing 3.2-GHz processor with Hyper-Threading technology and the new 875P chipset, along with an 800-MHz front side bus, an advanced 128MB NVIDIA GeForce FX 5200 or RADEON 9800 XT graphics card, and a 10/100 built-in Ethernet network. Capped with 512MB of dual-channel DDR SDRAM and a 17-inch CRT display, Dell is ready to frag with the big boys.

▪ Dell XPS II; \$2,199 and up; www.dell.com



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PlayStation 2

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KNOW WHEN TO FOLD 'EM

The hardware laws of physics dictate that if you can't make a product any smaller, it must fold into itself for greater portability. That's the premise behind NEC-Mitsubishi's 1765 LCD monitor. This lightweight 17-inch desktop monitor folds up into a compact package that weighs only 13.2 pounds.

NEC knows that anything folded up and lugged around needs to withstand as much wear and tear as possible. The acrylic screens do that, but still deliver sharp image quality, displaying 1280 x 1024 resolution with 400:1 contrast. At \$549, the 1765 will make you the mobile gaming hustler you've always dreamed of being.

▪ NEC 1765 LCD; \$549; www.necmitsubishi.com

EAR CANDY

There are stereos you play your music on and then there are stereos that you just play with. Philips' 330-Watt FWC577 is the latter. While it provides the Max sound technology that gets your entire home a-rockin', its Gameport connection and USB PC link make it more than just a cranking stereo.

With its five-CD changer, digital sound control, and three-way bass reflex, the FWC577 performs adequately. As the multifunctional appliance that combines your console and your PC, your gaming experience is forever enhanced. Now all you need are the PC, the CDs, and the games to match it.

▪ Philips FWC577; \$319; www.philips.com



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PlayStation[®]2



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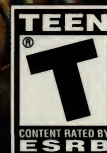


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EYE CANDY

With its high-quality camera, microphone, and motion sensor, Sony would have you believe that their Eye Toy accessory is grooming the PS2 as a multimedia conferencing tool. The Eye Toy's release coincides with the PS2 Internet rollout, accommodating long distance chats.

Gamers, recognizing the potential for an aerobic gaming experience, see right through that premise. Calibrated by your body's position on camera, you are immediately dropped into a limited number of titles. These include a *Dance Dance Revolution*-style dancing game and a kung fu action game. The Eye Toy is all about getting inside the game.

▪ Sony eye Toy; \$39; www.us.playstation.com



TOTALLY EXTREME

Nobody should ever have to press the spacebar to fire a photon torpedo mid-dogfight. There's just something so unaesthetic about it. Combating that problem is Logitech's Extreme 3D Pro.

With the 3D Pro, an eight-way rubberized hat switch with 12 action buttons, your days of blaming your crashing and burnings on your controller are over. The Extreme 3D Pro's twisting handle makes for pinpoint accuracy and smoothness, whether you're searching the skies for surly bogies or tearing up the battlefields. And for \$34.99, we can even tolerate the gratuitous use of the word "extreme."

▪ Logitech Extreme 3D Pro; \$34.99; www.logitech.com



XBOX TV

RCA probably sold your family its first television. With the 27V550T, the company finally gives a nod to the gaming community.

Equipped with a VPORT, the 27V550T connects to your Xbox without any standard audio/video cables. It also includes a digital optical output for connecting your console to a surround-sound system. Not only does this format enable greater gaming quality, it also frees up inputs for other systems.

At 27 inches and \$250, this could be the only television you need. Besides the gaming compatibility and affordability, it just looks cool, too.

▪ **RCA 27V550T; \$250; www.rca.com**



ADAPT THIS

Internet gaming feeds your undying need to compete with—and talk inordinate amounts of smack to—gamers around the world. But the clutter of necessary wiring has probably kept you from taking that plunge. Linksys' Wireless B Game Adapter lets you enable your console's online functions or form a "cable-less cable" for head-to-head gaming between two rival consoles.

With communication speeds of up to 11 Mbps, the Linksys adapter can take your PlayStation, GameCube, or Xbox and give you even more people to play with. Just watch out: What you gain in competitive gaming you may lose in real social interaction. A 802.11g version is also available for \$100.

▪ **Linksys Wireless B Game Adapter; \$70; www.linksys.com**

Cell Games That Don't Suck

At up to eight bucks a pop, you'll be hurting in more ways than one if you download the wrong game. Here are a few fall titles actually worth the time you want to kill.

—Mark Spoonauer



FOX Sports Boxing

What's the point of beating the crap out of someone if you can't see the damage you're inflicting? That's the beauty of Sorrent's first-person fighting game, where the boxers acquire black eyes and bleed as you overwhelm them with your jabs, hooks, and uppercuts. The ringside chicks holding up the signs aren't bad looking, either. The game is available from all the major carriers, but a wireless multiplayer version should be available from Sprint by the time you read this. If not, read the previous sentence again about a week from now and you should be good to go.

Available on AT&T Wireless, Cingular Wireless, Nextel, Sprint PCS, Verizon Wireless
www.sorrent.com



TRON

Even if you don't remember this sci-fi flick from the 80's, you'll love the light cycle races in this 3D-esque game. The play is shown from an orthogonal, 3D-like view as you attempt to defeat your opponents by creating light trails that force them to crash and burn. It's just like *Snake*, but with visuals that won't put you to sleep. Want to watch the movie? The timing of this wireless game release just so happens to coincide with that of the special-edition DVD. What luck!

Available on Sprint PCS
www.disneymobile.com



Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell

Just when you thought Sam Fisher could take a breather, there's more baddies for him to stealthily pick off on your cell. Your favorite reluctant hero is back with the black-ops NSA sub-agency Third Echelon, except this time your missions take place in a side-scrolling environment. The formula is the same—Sneak up behind the enemy and take 'em down. Just remember to hide those bodies. And spray a little air freshener, would ya?

Available on AT&T Wireless, Verizon Wireless
www.gameloft.com

Nintendo Cuts the Cord

Sure, you can skate against the punk next to you in a hearty round of *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater Underground* if you connect your Game Boys with a cable. But, while being tethered to your opponent has some advantages—you can easily distract him with a wet willie mid-ollie—after a while you start to feel like a Siamese twin. Now, Nintendo has buddied up with Motorola, which is developing a wireless adapter for the GBA and GBA SP to let as many as five players compete simultaneously from up to 30 feet away.

Using a proprietary 2.4-GHz technology, this wireless adapter contains a 32-bit RISC base band processor and an RF transceiver. Translation? You don't have to use Bluetooth or a cellular network if you want to go wireless with your gameplay. "It's very focused on optimizing the gaming experience because it's much better in terms of latency [than Bluetooth] and the power consumption is significantly lower," says Bridgette Cosentino, director of wireless connectivity for Motorola's Radio Products Division. "So you actually have an experience that's very similar to wired."

Unfortunately, you'll have to wait to go wire-free. The adapter won't be available until January in Japan, and Nintendo has yet to announce a U.S. launch date.

—MS



High-Def Clamshell

Available exclusively from AT&T Wireless, the bullet-shaped NEC 515 HDM flip phone brings wireless gaming to another level. With its large, bright color screen, polyphonic ringtones, and cool Java games, this cell puts other so-called multimedia phones to shame.

Although it may not break any new barriers for portability, the 3.5-ounce 515 HDM is easy to stuff into a pocket. At just over three inches, it's a bit longer than many clamshell phones, but its streamlined, titanium-gray shape fits neatly into the hand. From the outside, the phone looks simple—no external display, no protruding antenna, and two buttons on the front cover, which are used to adjust call volume.

Once you flip it open, the 515 HDM quickly goes from simple to space age. Its 2.2-inch, 65,536-color screen stands out, rendering images in bright and vivid detail. (The HDM stands for High Definition Mobile, get it?) A generous number of controls make full use of the phone's elongated footprint, including large, backlit numeric keys, as well as a central scroll pad and four action buttons that double as application hot keys.

The 515 HDM has strong gaming capabilities. The phone includes a dedicated game processor for faster, more responsive play that doesn't conflict with incoming calls. Our phone shipped with two games, the space shooter *Star Diversion* and a baseball game, and we soon found ourselves addicted to bombarding enemy ships as we cruised around a futuristic city on the sharp screen.

We have two minor complaints. Because the upper left-hand action button is so close to the central touchpad, we often hit it accidentally, pausing gameplay. The only other downside for cell phone gamers is that the phone relies on the DoJa variant of Java, meaning it may not be compatible with all cell phone games.

The 515 HDM works admirably as a phone. Reception was strong, calls came in loud and clear in both New York and San Francisco, and the phone lasted for three to four days between charges, even with a large dose of backlit gameplay. We really liked that we could customize color themes and screen contrast.

NEC America 515 HDM

Price
\$200-\$320

www.nechdm.com

Pros

- > Big, bright color screen
- > Dual processors for better gameplay
- > Works as world phone

Cons

- > No LCD on outside for caller ID

While truly advanced phone junkies may prefer a model with a built-in camera, peeps who are primarily focused on making calls and killing time by killing a few enemy space ships should be more than satisfied with this high definition mobile.

—Elaine Chen



Game Boy for Grown-Ups

Yes, Mario is cute. But so are Barbie and the Gilmore Girls, in a grating, want-to-tear-your-nose-hairs-out kind of way. Turn your Game Boy into a man with these grown-up titles.

Medal of Honor Infiltrator

Publisher Electronic Arts | Developer EA LA

Remember *Commando* on the NES? If so, you'll love the rapid-fire action in this top-down-view 2D shooter from EA. You can aim in eight different directions as the enemy closes in on every side. And those shoulder buttons aren't just for decoration. Use them to keep the aim of your rifle or rocket launcher steady while you dodge bullets. Nice.



Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2004

Publisher Electronic Arts | Developer EA Redwood Studios

You can either freeze your ass off this winter waiting for a tee time or you can play a virtual round that feels a lot like the console version, anytime, anywhere. Forget about the mundane timed-button press approach of yore. The guys at Digital Eclipse have ported over their patented "total precision" control, which allows you to swing with the D-pad for a more natural feel.



Top Gear Rally

Publisher Kemco | Developer Kemco

Mud, snow, ice, rain, dirt, gravel. If it's realistic 3D racing you crave—complete with unrealistic jumps—this is the game to get. Players can tackle more than 50 tracks in ten regions and move up the ranks to master advanced maneuvers like drifting to corner like a pro. Customize your ride *Fast and Furious*-style and unlock new vehicles as you progress. No Slim Jim required.



Tony Hawk's Underground

Publisher Activision | Developer Neversoft

Even if your posing days are over, you'll appreciate Activision's latest incarnation of the best skating game of all time. Start from scratch as a boarding novice and pull off combos to earn better moves. You can also get off your deck for the first time to execute "Run Out" moves, as well as avoid people who hate your kind. Don't like what's under your feet? Customize your own board before you kick it curbside.



James Bond 007: Everything or Nothing

Publisher Electronic Arts | Developer EA Redwood Studios

Showing off may be one of the best perks of being a well-dressed secret agent, but you'll have to use stealth to keep your health in this third-person action title. Your reward? Style points, which help you buy upgrades from the infamous Q, including quieter shoes. If you don't mind being seen in the open, you can even link up with another Bond wannabe for a quick Deathmatch.



—MS

STEALTH BOMBSHELL



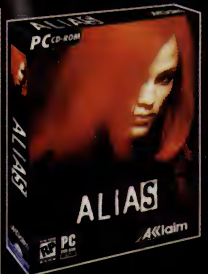
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MegaWorks 5.1

Audio

NVIDIA Soundstorm

High-Speed Ports

Six USB 2.0, FireWire

Warranty/Tech Support

Three-year replacement

The Voodoo F-Class F510 makes a fantastic first impression. With its stunning Imola Orange Allure Finish and Eye of the Storm Window, the Voodoo wowed us with its sleek design. Coupled with a matching 22-inch NEC monitor (yes, the monitor is painted the same color), the whole package looks like a cross between a 1970s airbrushed van and an alien spacecraft.

But looks aren't everything. The gurus at Voodoo have taken this to heart by creating a gaming rig that really puts out. The F510 has all the top-notch hardware a hardcore gamer could ask for, including an AMD Athlon 3200+ processor, an ASUS A7N8X-Deluxe motherboard with SATA, an NVIDIA 256MB GeForce FX 5900 Ultra video card, and 1GB of Corsair PC-3500 dual-channel memory. The two SATA 36GB Western Digital 10,000-rpm drives are pretty damn nice, too. The Voodoo Aggressor Cooling System, comprised of four fans, keeps the F510 surprisingly quiet.

For sound output, the Voodoo featured an NVIDIA Soundstorm sound card and the Creative Megaworks 5.1 speaker set. Another key feature is the set of dual-network adapters, which are

great for people who want to share their Internet connection but don't have a switch or a hub.

On the other hand, our test rig lacked some features we've seen in other systems, namely a DVD burner, a smart card reader, and front USB ports.

Expansion is truly painless with the F510. The Eye of the Storm Window slides off to reveal a beautifully designed case that is simply a work of art. The blue Electric Veins lighting is a great touch. Since the video card occupies the AGP slot and an additional PCI slot, you're left with only four PCI slots. There's an empty IDE controller on the motherboard in case you want to add two more IDE devices.

When put to the test, the Voodoo F-Class F510 performed well, if not spectacularly. On the 3DMark03 test it scored 3,601 at 1024 x 768 resolution and 1,943 at 1280 x 1024 with 4X anti-aliasing.

These scores are at the low end of systems we've tested recently, and were a little lower than the Alienware system we looked at. Despite the 3DMark scores, real-world performance was flawless. Running the latest games, the F510 basically laughed at what we threw at it. *Unreal Tournament*, set at 1600 x 1200, full details, and highest textures, ran at a sweet 85 fps. Other resource hogs, such as *Madden NFL 2004* and *Call of Duty*, ran incredibly smooth on the F510.

We think Voodoo should reconsider including the Logitech Wireless Keyboard and Mouse combo with their machines. They're fine for typing and navigating, but they're not the most gameplay friendly. Our advice is to upgrade to the Intellimouse and Natural Keyboard.

The Voodoo F-Class F510 is a solid piece of gaming hardware. Not only does it have top-notch parts, but it's put together incredibly well, and you just can't beat the look of it. ☺

PROS

Nicely laid out case

Serial ATA drives

GeForce FX Ultra 5900

Dual-network adaptors

CONS

Poor wireless
keyboard and mouse

No smart card reader

Windows XP Home





**REAL-WORLD
PERFORMANCE WAS
FLAWLESS. RUNNING THE
LATEST GAMES, THE F510
BASICALLY LAUGHED AT
WHAT WE THREW AT IT.**

Alienware Aurora Extreme

Supercala-frag-alistic

www.alienware.com

Price

\$3,491

CPU

AMD ATHLON XP 3200+

RAM

1GB DDR SDRAM

Hard Drive

120GB 7,200-rpm

Optical Drive

4X2.4X12X DVD+R/
DVD+RW/DVD-ROM,
52X32X52X CD-RW

Display

19-inch NEC
MULTISYNC 991SB

Graphics

NVIDIA 256MB
GEFORCE FX 5900
ULTRA

Speakers

LOGITECH Z-680 5.1

Audio

CREATIVE SOUND
BLASTER AUDIGY 2

High-Speed Ports

Six USB 2.0, FireWire

Warranty/Tech Support

One-year 24/7 Onsite

Alienware has built a solid reputation by selling incredible, over-the-top gaming rigs, and their latest machine, the Aurora, is no exception. Sporting Alienware's signature case design and top-of-the-line components, the Aurora has come ready to play.

The Aurora's specs are what dreams are made of. Under the hood is an AMD AthlonXP 3200+ processor, an NVIDIA 256MB GeForce FX 5900 Ultra, an ASUS A7N8X Deluxe motherboard with SATA, RAID, and 1GB of Corsair XMS DDR SDRAM. Rounding out the package is a 120GB Seagate Barracuda 7,200-rpm ATA-100 hard drive, a DVD burner, a smart card reader, and four front-mounted USB ports. The Sound Blaster Audigy 2 6.1 sound card and Logitech Z-680 speakers handle the audio—a pretty sweet package.

Don't let the funky shaped case fool you—it's easy to open. Once inside, you'll have access to three available PCI slots and an IDE controller (for two additional IDE devices).

Five fans keep this baby cool, but they produce a fair amount of noise in the process. Another nice feature of the case is the set of removable drive mounts for the drives, which makes changing them a snap.

On our 3DMark benchmark tests, it was no surprise that the Alienware Aurora topped our charts. At 1024 x 768 resolution, the Aurora scored a respectable 4782, and at 1280 x 1024 with 4X anti-aliasing, the Aurora scored 2439. Real-world gameplay was impressive. *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield: 1942*, both set at 1600 x 1200 with full details, ran smoothly, and applications such as Outlook opened instantly. We played multiple video files at once. This is one fast rig. ☺

PROS

Incredible performance

Nice sound package—Audigy 2

Cool case design

DVD Burner

CONS

No Rear USB ports

Huge case

A little on the loud side

Windows XP Home



**SPORTING
ALIENWARE'S
SIGNATURE CASE
DESIGN AND
TOP-OF-THE-LINE
COMPONENTS,
THE AURORA
HAS COME
READY TO PLAY.**

Same Parts, Different Results

Both the Voodoo F510 and the Alienware Aurora have identical parts: chip, motherboard, and video card. Why did the Aurora perform so much better? The Aurora rig we tested had memory that was a bit faster than the F510, which we determined by using CPU ID. This free utility (www.cpubid.com) reported differences in the memory latency.

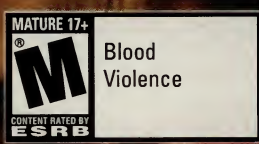
The Aurora continues to show why Alienware is still on top of its game. Combined with their great tech support, documentation, and overall performance, you can't go wrong with this beast.





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Tom Clancy's
RAINBOW SIX 3



UBISOFT

FREEDOM ISN'T FREE



WORLD

Foreign Ambassadors Report Peaceful Face-to-Face Negotiations with Terrorists in Venezuela

By Michael Golden
GLOBAL PRESS NETWORK

was relieved that the situation did not turn violent despite the heightened tensions between the two sides. As of yet, no

Venezuela - A government official...



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Can You Hear Me Now?

Whether it's for talking smack to your opponent or teaming up to ambush the enemy, your voice is an important weapon in your online arsenal. So listen up and listen good.

Back in the olden days, like 1998, cryptic in-game text messages, usually pre-written scripts added to the game's .ini file, were all you needed to taunt death-match opponents or communicate with allies during *Quake II* capture-the-flag matches.

But cooperative online gameplay has made actual conversation more desirable for today's difficult mission conditions, which require split-second communication and coordinated teamwork.


"At the competitive level, it's essential. Playing without voice would be like trying to play tennis in sandals," says Valve Software managing director Gabe Newell. "At the social level, it's reasonably popular. As game developers learn

more about how to use it in their game designs, voice will become more fundamental to the experience."

The growing popularity of squad games has also opened up voice as a must-have online feature for both the Xbox and PS2. So why haven't more computer gamers embraced voice in their online matches? Gas Powered Games' Chris Taylor, best known for *Total Annihilation* and *Dungeon Siege*, blames the lack of adoption on the lack of standardization.

"It's been fairly slow to catch on, but that's not to say it won't radically transform gaming when it eventually does," Taylor says. "I have the gear, but oftentimes I find that the person I am playing with does not. This is the challenge. Until everyone is equipped, this will be slow to catch on."

Just like the mystifying abundance of competing DVD-recording formats, there is no one VoIP (Voice over IP) standard. What package you use depends on who you want to play with and what they are already using. That's fine for gamers in a supportive clan or individuals in the know, but the competing standards add another barrier for those who want to give voice a try but don't know where to start.



Headsets from Logitech and Plantronics provide an all-in-one communications tool for your fragfests.

The ABCs of VoIP

VoIP software rides on your Internet connection. The most popular voice packages run as one more connectivity service alongside other services sharing your bandwidth.

The beauty of this arrangement is that any VoIP service is generally game independent; the player is free to use the package of his or her choice without being forced to use different software for different games. The downside is that any VoIP package becomes another hardware resource and bandwidth drain. You can do voice on a low-end Pentium II over a 56-Kbps modem connection, but the slower the hardware and connection resources, the more quality will be sacrificed. If you own a decent gaming PC, your system should have more than enough resources to do the job.

In any online match where players want to compete with voice connectivity, someone has to set up a VoIP server for everyone else to connect to. There is a negative to being the VoIP host: Just

as people discovered years ago that it was often a competitive disadvantage to host a death-match server from the same PC you played on, some of those same slowdown issues can pop up with VoIP servers.

Hosting the occasional pick-up match is one thing, but if your player group's online habits are fairly regular, investing in a separate PC to host both the game and VoIP server software is recommended.

The Fantastic Four

Which VoIP is best? That's an argument right up there with, "Which is better, *Quake III Arena* or *Unreal Tournament*, Intel or AMD?" We're not stepping into that minefield. VoIP packages from four manufacturers get the best marks: Ventrilo, TeamSpeak, Roger Wilco, and Game Voice. A fifth candidate, TeamSound had a rocky launch, but

Teaming Masses

The truly ambitious can now go off to design, configure, and master their own unique *Neverwinter Nights* quest complete with voice communication for all party members. For most gamers, finding an existing community to test a new voiceover makes more sense. Here are some games that attract a lot of voice players:



Battlefield 1942



Half-Life: Counter-Strike



Unreal Tournament 2003



Medal of Honor: Allied Assault

has made major strides toward solving its early reliability issues.

Compared to the rest, Game Voice is something of an odd duck. Instead of being headphone and microphone independent, the package was designed around a proprietary headset and hardware base from Microsoft. This allows the package to include unique features like voice recognition. If you do not want to use Microsoft's hardware, a free downloadable version called Game Voice Share is available, which allows anyone to join a Game Voice session online or host a session with

“AT THE COMPETITIVE LEVEL, IT’S ESSENTIAL. PLAYING WITHOUT VOICE WOULD BE LIKE TRYING TO PLAY TENNIS IN SANDALS,” SAYS VALVE SOFTWARE MANAGING DIRECTOR GABE NEWELL.



up to three other Game Voice Share users.

Every one of these VoIP packages has features such as multiple channels, channel passwords, and server passwords. When it comes to more advanced features, such as sub-channels, hot-key configuration, and remote administration, the choices narrow to Ventrilo, TeamSpeak, and TeamSound.

Of special note is alternative-platform support. Roger Wilco has a Macintosh client, and TeamSpeak provides a Linux client.

If choosing and setting up a VoIP server looks to be too daunting a task, check out server providers such as Online Stomping Grounds (OSG). They can provide Ventrilo, TeamSpeak, Roger Wilco, and Game Voice servers configured

and ready to go. If you're looking for access to shared or dedicated game servers, these providers can do the trick.

Sound Check

With the exception of Game Voice, your headphone and microphone choice is up to you, depending on what connectors are available on your PC. Whether your computer comes equipped with a sound card or with sound support on the motherboard, analog stereo headphone output and microphone input miniplug ports should be available in the back of your PC.

Some audio systems do not require a sound card at all and are run through the PC's USB hub. Either way, players can buy and use USB equipment.

In general, most voice veterans prefer a headset that includes headphones and a microphone in one unit, which tends to be more comfortable and adjustable. However, there are feedback issues with stationary microphones if they get too close to the PC or monitor. When the competition gets manic, keeping the microphone a consistent distance from one's mouth is very important in maintaining voice quality during the match.

Manufacturers of game-ready headsets include Logitech, Altec Lansing, Audio-Technica, Koss, Plantronics, and Telex. But they're not for everyone.

“What I want is a higher-quality microphone with audiophile-quality output in a wireless package,” says Newell. “I tried going with headsets for aviators, but the audio quality was terrible, there were compatibility issues with the microphone, and the noise cancellation feature didn't work as well as earplugs like the Etymotic line. When we get back into heavy testing with *Team Fortress 2*, I'm going to try some of the wireless musician's performance headsets.”

What's Next

How will voiceover evolve in the months to come from the developer's perspective?

Gas Powered Games is representative of a lot of studios. Taylor says that until many more gamers have standardized voice software and hardware hooked up to their PCs, his team can't start making any specific design decisions that are technology dependent.

But at Valve, Newell and his team already see voiceover as a necessary feature, and they are very interested in discovering better ways to use it today.

“Right now we are adding more voice-based situational awareness UI to our bots,” Newell told us. “Basically the bots will do a really good job of keeping you aware of what is going on while you play using voice. We're thinking that will help educate players to this specific aspect of voice interactions.

“We have lots of other voice-related issues to look at once we are satisfied with the resolution,” Newell pledged. ☞

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America's Most Wanted

When it comes to killing for fun and profit, pro gaming champ Jonathan "FATAL1TY" Wendel is number one with a virtual gun.

Wake up. Eat lunch.

Use chain-gun to rip the neighbor a new one. Welcome to another day in the life of Jonathan Wendel, otherwise known as FATAL1TY.

Four years ago, the 22-year-old was just another

average student at DeVry University's Kansas City campus. Now, having bagged a first-place finish at the World Cyber Games in Seoul and earned the title Cyberathlete Professional League (CPL) Champion of the Year for three years running, he's a full-fledged sensation, rockin' corporate sponsors, a thriving production company, and even his own clothing line. Not half bad for a kid who spends 40 hours a week minimum glued to a game of *Unreal Tournament*.

"The secret to anything is practice," Wendel explains. "Even though I'm playing games for a living, it's just like a full-time job. You have to put in your hours." Granted, explaining such a schedule to non-believers can be difficult; our resident pro typically conducts training sessions between the



Photograph by William Duke

“EVEN THOUGH I’M PLAYING GAMES FOR A LIVING, IT’S JUST LIKE A FULL-TIME JOB. YOU HAVE TO PUT IN YOUR HOURS.”

hours of 8 p.m. and 4 a.m. Rising at noon, daily demands require he jump straight out of bed and onto the phone with his agent, who facilitates all business dealings. Before most gamers have even polished off their lunch, Wendel’s already begun conversing with sponsors, planning product development deals, and scheduling trade show appearances.

Assuming, of course, it’s not one of the rising superstar’s days off, which see him busy traversing the globe. “I’ve visited so many places, I can hardly remember them all,” the beleaguered pro confesses. “Germany, Singapore, Australia...I just got back from Dallas, and was in Los Angeles the week before. Now, I have to return almost immediately. In the last four weeks, I’ve been away on business trips equally as many times.”

Still, such a rigorous schedule has its benefits; the combined \$60,000 in endorsement deals he’s scored with Auravision and Razer buys an awful lot of copies of *Quake*, and does wonders for one’s credibility as a budding businessman.

“Any cash I earn is invested right back into my company,” the enterprising dealmaker says. “I want to sponsor teams, events...host my own LAN party. Helping others make their dreams come true and growing the gaming community is what’s most important.” It’s an attitude few fellow professional athletes share, whether touchdowns or team frag counts are their scoring system of choice. Even amongst FPS enthusiasts, such affability is rare. Luckily, Wendel is nothing if not gracious. “In the past, top gamers wouldn’t even give normal people the time of day,” he sheepishly admits. “I’ve got 200 e-mails from fans sitting in my inbox right now. I always do my best to answer every one.”

Despite being the people’s champ, the man does possess a mean streak—as the saying goes, “nice guys finish last.” An active competitor growing up, Wendel devotedly dabbled with tennis and pool in high school prior to settling on his current career path. Hence, the clever lad knew a thing or two about competition before entering the virtual arena. “I understand the mentality,” he asserts with a conspiratorial whisper. “I study opponents, learn how to counter them. It’s all about performance under pressure.”

A picky conscience won’t let him settle for less

comes sacrifice, though. Wendel acknowledges he’s given up certain things of value to pursue his dreams. “It’s like how [Andre] Agassi trained all the time as a kid—he missed out on his entire childhood,” he says. “I’ve effectively thrown away any hope of having lived the life of a normal teenager.” Then again, Wendel also asserts that he still keeps in touch with friends, sees them all the time at professional gaming events, and can tear the town up and dance a drunken jig with the best of ‘em.

While that’s all well and good for personal relationships, the one thing the burgeoning hell-raiser can’t juggle at the same time as his career is a college education. Happily, success hasn’t gone to his head. “I’m blessed to be a part of the professional gaming circuit. It’ll make one hell of a story to tell my grandchildren,” Wendel smirks. “But while I intend to keep competing, if it all goes away tomorrow, it’s no big deal...I’ve earned enough to see me through four years of school without student loans.”

Reserved, yet a risk taker. Strong, yet self-aware. These qualities and more have served the rising star well. Truly a man of many faces, Wendel nonetheless sees the secret to his success as infinitely simpler than a casual glance would reveal. “No matter what I do, I dedicate my focus to one thing and one thing alone,” he laughs. “Being the best there is.” ☺

than the best:

“There’s this internal drive that compels me to win. Like how Tiger Woods dominates his sport, that’s how I have to do mine.”

With success

Killing Against the Clock A Day in the Life of FATAL1TY

12:00pm

Wake up. Stop dreaming about more efficient ways to murder friends.

12:30-1:30pm

Field phone calls, check e-mail, and discuss plans for world domination with agent.

1:30-2:00pm

Break for lunch. Remind self that eating rivals alive doesn’t count.

2:00-4:00pm

Pursue potential sponsors. Give input on self-endorsed product line.

4:00-7:00pm

Plan trade show appearances and discuss travel plans.

7:00-8:00pm

Find suitable sparring partner and set up meeting time.

8:00pm-4:00am

Embarrass challenger by steadily wasting him at *Unreal Tournament 2003* for hours on end.

4:15am

Consider bathing/taking a bathroom break.

4:30am

Decide against pit stops. Stare longingly at computer. Kiss it goodnight and turn off the lights.

Blood Work

Inspired by vampires and armed with *Half-Life 2*'s engine, Troika Games is creating what may be a *Diablo*-sized blockbuster RPG.

Some game developers have a high sense of self-importance. Leonard Boyarsky, joint CEO and art director at Troika Games, is not one of those people.

"I guarantee you that more than 50 percent of the excitement about our *Vampire* game has nothing to do with Troika or the license—it's the *Half-Life 2* engine," he admits.



Boyarsky isn't about to complain. He knows that by using the *Half-Life 2* technology, Troika will be able to attract a whole new audience to its next role-playing game, *Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines*. "This game is a big experiment for us," Boyarsky says. "We hope to take sales for an RPG to a whole new level."

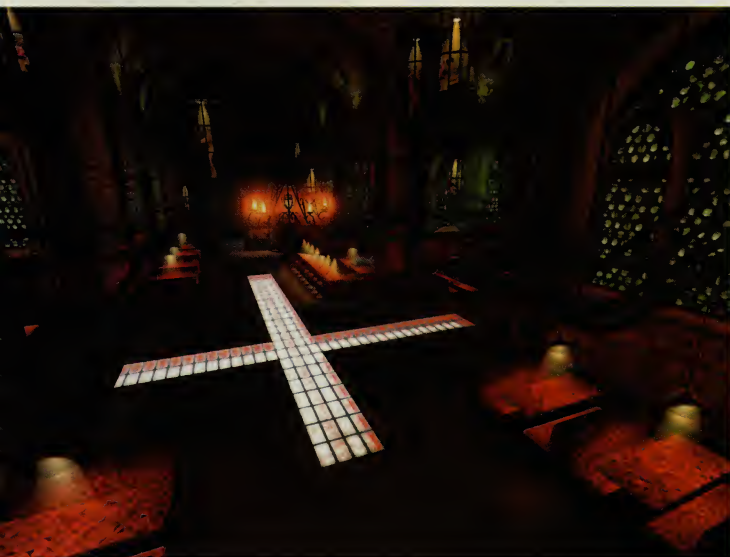
Boyarsky's dream to hit it big with *Vampire* is understandable. Troika, a small, 35-person company based in Orange County, California, commands a lot of respect among a hardcore crowd of RPG fanatics, but breakout success has thus far eluded the three-year-old company. It was co-founded by Boyarsky, Tim Cain, and Jason Andersen, the core team responsible for *Fallout*, a cult-hit RPG published by Interplay before the three broke away to form Troika. To date, Troika's games have been heralded for innovative design work, but have appealed mostly to a hardcore niche that doesn't mind isometric 2D graphics and copious onscreen text.

Vampire, though, should change the stakes. Thanks to *Half-Life 2*'s technology, Troika's leading-edge design can now be married to spectacular graphics and 3D characters that can talk, express emotions, and yes, even expose their fangs.

Half-Life 2's technology will sex up *Vampire*'s visual look, yet Boyarsky promises the game will feel very much like past Troika RPGs. "Our designs always have multiple solutions to quests, and *Vampire* will be no different," he says, highlighting the open-ended nature of Troika's games. Another tenet of Troika's design philosophy is letting players create their own character. "A game like *Planetscape: Torment* gives you a character to play, but we always make our RPGs so you can define your own character," Boyarsky says.

No game demonstrated Troika's open-ended design philosophy more than *Arcanum*. Released in 2001, it was Troika's first game. Set in a 19th-century Victorian world in the midst of an industrial revolution, *Arcanum* met with good reviews, though not raves, and reasonable sales. Looking back on the project, Boyarsky says Troika may have taken its open-ended design too far. "That game was so open-ended we couldn't even test all the possibilities," he admits. Going forward, Boyarsky knows the company has to balance an open-ended design against what will make the best game experience. "No matter what, we have to make sure the choices a player makes in the game will lead to a fun experience," he says.

After *Arcanum*, Troika was hoping to refine the game's design with a sequel. But those plans fell by the wayside when Sierra, *Arcanum*'s publisher, unceremoniously cancelled the sequel. "Sierra just called us up and pulled the rug out from under



us,” Boyarsky recalls. Then, as if to add insult to injury, Troika had another project cancelled: a *Lord of the Rings* role-playing game that was shelved because of legal issues.

“Those really were the darkest days for us,” Boyarsky remembers. For a while, it seemed like Troika’s days as a small development shop might be numbered. “We never missed a payroll, but when I look back on it, I’m not sure how we made that happen.”

But as the old saying goes, the sky is often darkest before the dawn. Right when things seemed the worst, Atari called and asked Troika to develop *The Temple of Elemental Evil*, a *Dungeons & Dragons* RPG that was released in September. And soon there was another iron in the fire: Valve Software agreed to license Troika its still-in-development *Half-Life 2* technology. While Troika

had never created a fully-3D game, Boyarsky says the entire company was energized by the creative possibilities of working in 3D. “There’s just so much more you can do in terms of storytelling in 3D,” he said.

Armed with the *Half-Life 2* technology, Troika signed a deal with Activision for *Vampire*, a first-person game based on White Wolf’s popular pen-and-paper RPG world. *Vampire* is a departure for Troika, but Boyarsky insists they are making a true RPG, not just an action game masquerading as an RPG. “After this we will know if you can make a serious RPG that has blockbuster potential,” he suggests.

What’s more, the game will test whether Troika has what it takes to become a blockbuster studio like Blizzard or id Software. Boyarsky admits such acclaim would be nice, but at the same time, he’s proud that Troika has a reputation for crafting solid role-playing games. “At least we didn’t have to turn to making Barbie games to stay in business,” he jokes. That’s one open-ended game design we’re happy not to have seen. ☺

Set in the seedy Los Angeles of the night, *Bloodlines* brings a new dimension to RPG games—the life of a vampire.



The Troika Timeline

Leonard Boyarsky, Tim Cain, and Jason Anderson meet success developing Interplay’s cult RPG hit *Fallout*. A rabid fan base follows.



Troika Games releases its first game, the RPG *Arcanum*, for Sierra. The game is met with solid reviews and reasonable sales.



Troika goes back to their roots as they work with Atari to release *Dungeons & Dragons: The Temple of Elemental Evil*.



Armed with Valve’s powerful Source engine, will Troika take RPGs to the next level with *Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines*? The forecast looks good.

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Halo 2

Hail to the Chief

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Microsoft
Game Studios

Developer
Bungie Studios

Genre
Action FPS

Release Date
Spring 2004

Buzz Meter



Xbox

What else can we say about *Halo 2* but that it's the must-have title of spring 2004? While Bungie is keeping mum about the plot, we know from the teaser trailer and E3 demo that Covenant forces have

reached Earth and are unleashing their might to annihilate the human race. Another ring is part of the story—more Flood and a bit more on the Forerunner, possibly. If you haven't followed the play-by-play of *Halo 2*'s progress on the Web (shame on you), here's the scoop so far:

Master Chief, the surviving genetically enhanced soldier who defeated an entire Covenant fleet in the first *Halo*, returns to our planet to kick ass with home-field advantage. In the trailer footage, Covenant ships orbit Earth and human defenses are at full capacity and taking a beating. We see multitudes of explosions of nuclear proportions on Earth's surface.

Once again, Master Chief is at it alone (with the exception of Cortana on the comm link), and dives from his ship right into the action. With the moon and a stunning Earth in view, and as Master Chief free-falls onto a Covenant ship, the graphics are even more beautiful than the first, if not downright chilling.

The gameplay from the E3 demo showcases an astounding amount of heart-stopping action. A drop ship takes Chief to New Mombasa, a city being heavily bombarded, and Marines are squashed left and right. Chief has a few new tricks

up his sleeve: He can now hold one weapon in each hand, and jump onto and take over moving Covenant vehicles. As if the enemy A.I. wasn't already smart enough, Bungie promises they'll make survival a real bitch this time around.

In addition to the superb graphics and a lighting engine that creates a very realistic environment, there will be new weapons and vehicles, including



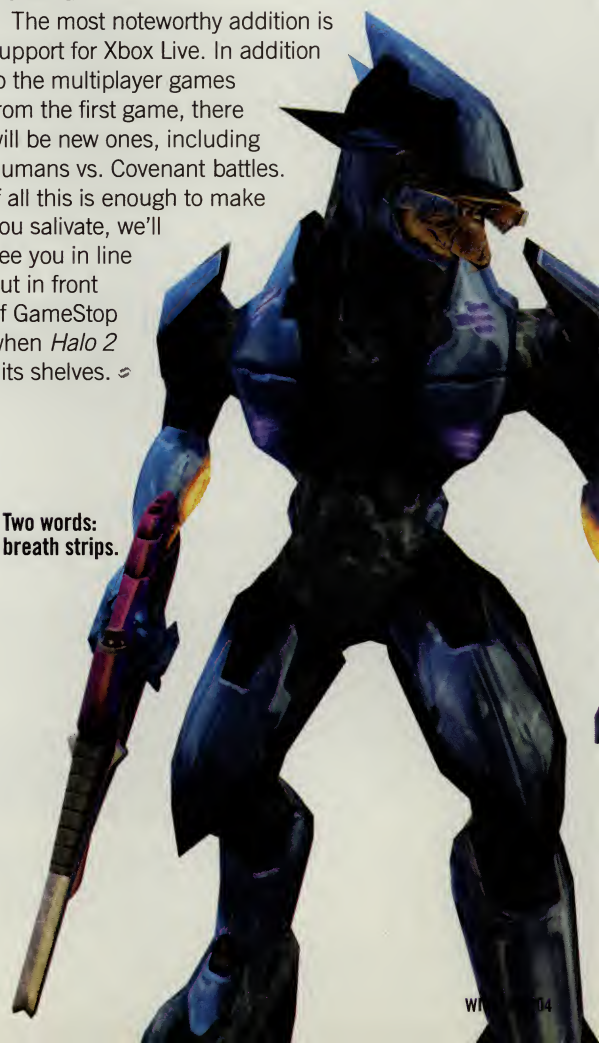
You talkin' to me?
No? My bad.

variations of the Warthog and the Covenant's Shadow. Most of the environment, including windows and doors, looks to be destructible. For good measure, a battle will take place on the moon.

In terms of the story, *Halo 2* will introduce the Covenant's political and religious leaders, the Prophets, and the battle-hungry Brutes. You'll also learn more about the relationship between the various Covenant races and their distaste for mankind.

The most noteworthy addition is support for Xbox Live. In addition to the multiplayer games from the first game, there will be new ones, including humans vs. Covenant battles. If all this is enough to make you salivate, we'll see you in line out in front of GameStop when *Halo 2* hits shelves. ☺

Two words:
breath strips.



Battlefield Vietnam

Rice paddies not included

Publisher:
EA Games

Developer:
Digital Illusions CE

Genre:
Action FPS

Release:
Spring 2004

Buzz Meter



PC



"Hurry up, we're missing the sexual revolution!"

The man in the black pajamas—now that is a worthy adversary. Coming off a successful online campaign through World War II in *Battlefield 1942*, Digital Illusions is gunning for a dirtier, sloppier war with *Battlefield Vietnam*.

There isn't a good way to distinguish your online character from the others in *BF1942*, but in *Vietnam* you'll be able to customize your soldier's race and look. For the arsenal, the game will feature many of the American weapons the war was known for, including the M-16 rifle, the F-4 Phantom jet, and the Huey helicopter, which can carry several soldiers and perform chain drops to move artillery around the map.

There's nothing like the smell of Napalm in the morning, and Americans will be able to break out the infamous chemical during air strikes. Though Charlie (NVA is the preferred nomenclature) didn't carve its reputation with cool vehicles and weapons, the Vietcong will have a bunch of Soviet toys and the ability to

set booby traps at their disposal to even the odds.

It wouldn't be 'Nam without booby traps and tiger pits, so EA is littering the battle maps with environmental pitfalls that players can activate to slow or stop enemy advances. The NVA engineers can plant booby traps on vehicles, and though no tunnels are being included in the game, the engineers will also be able to create new spawn points by digging holes around the map.

To give gamers more of a late 1960s/early 1970s flavor, Vietnam will feature many of the popular tunes of the time, including CCR's "Fortunate Son." While riding in the back of a Huey, you can sing along, man the machine gun turret, and take your frustration with being drafted out on the scattering enemy.

From our take this early in the game, *Battlefield Vietnam* shows a lot of promise. This is one tour of duty we'll willingly sign up for. ☺

StarCraft: Ghost

From strategy to stealth

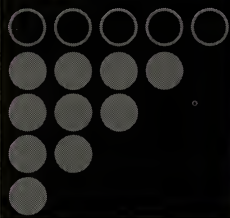
Publisher
Blizzard Entertainment

Developer
Nihilistic

Genre
Action

Release Date
Early 2004

Buzz Meter



GC | PS2 | Xbox

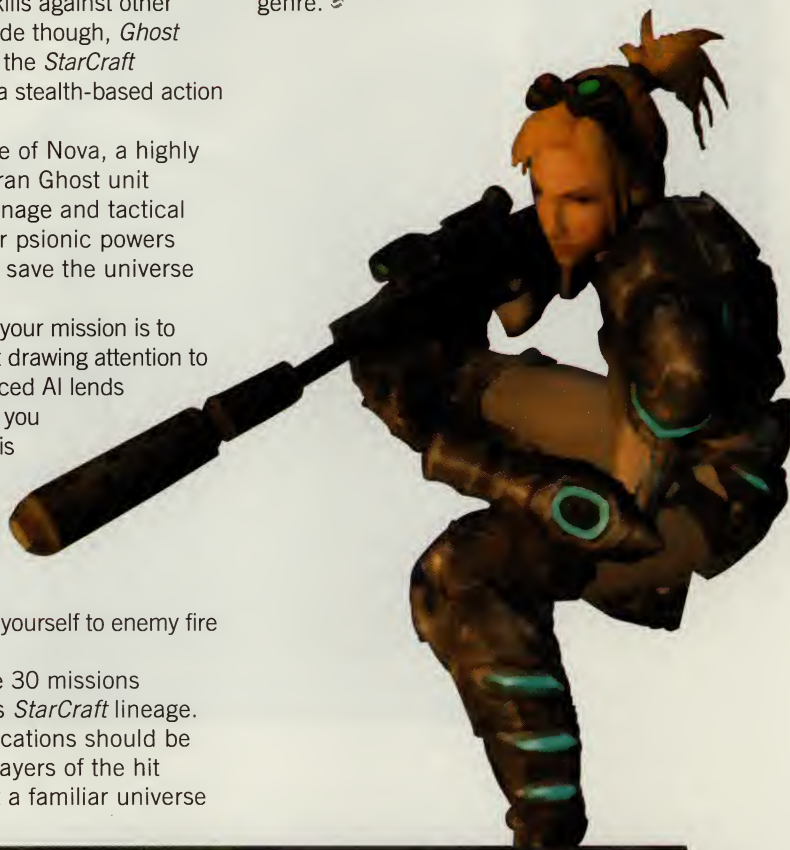
Many mouths hit the floor when Blizzard announced it would be publishing a *StarCraft* game that wasn't a PC-based RTS. After all, thousands of gamers still flock to the 1998 release online to test their skills against other aficionados. Shock value aside though, *Ghost* looks like it will keep fans of the *StarCraft* universe happy, even if it is a stealth-based action title for consoles.

Ghost puts you in the role of Nova, a highly evolved agent from the Terran Ghost unit extensively trained in espionage and tactical combat. Nova must use her psionic powers and advanced weaponry to save the universe from—what else?—aliens.

Like any solid stealth title, your mission is to take out the enemies without drawing attention to yourself. The enemy's advanced AI lends some logic to this strategy: If you rouse suspicion, your status is bleak indeed. If you get in a jam, Nova can use her psionic powers to slow her perception of time so you can line up that perfect headshot without subjecting yourself to enemy fire for too long.

The atmosphere over the 30 missions strongly reflects the game's *StarCraft* lineage. Most of the vehicles and locations should be instantly recognizable to players of the hit game, and this new look at a familiar universe is richly detailed.

As the stealth trend hits on all cylinders, *Ghost* must be mentioned in the same breath as *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow* when you're talking about the most anticipated games in the genre. ☺



Gran Turismo 4

Gearheads rejoice

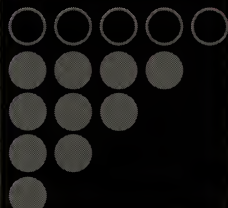
Publisher
Sony

Developer
Polyphony Digital

Genre
Racing

Release Date
2004

Buzz Meter



PS2

The realism and courses jam packed into *Gran Turismo 4* are impressive, but it's all about the cars—all 500 - plus of them. If you've dreamed of driving a concept car at the auto show, or wondered what it feels like to take a ride in wheels you can't afford, *Gran Turismo 4* is the closest you'll get without visiting the showroom.

No driving Ms. Daisy here, please—*GT4* is all about speed. The designers have painstakingly mapped every part of the vehicles down to the actual weights and speeds, and it shows in the immaculate graphics and driving physics. If you prefer the cockpit, the game can be played in first person view.

The selection of cars will include not only vintage and current models, but Formula One-type vehicles as well. Confirmed cars include the Nissan Z, Pontiac GTO, and the Mitsubishi Lancer Evo. With new tech and photo-quality backgrounds, the cars blend in seemingly with their surroundings. Courses will include New York City and the Grand Canyon. Suffice to say, "stunning" is an appropriate word, especially when



vehicles are moving in real time.

GT4 will feature online play, where you can race against and chat with six others from around the world.

Offline, *GT4* features an arcade mode where you drive against your buddies or the computer, and a hardcore simulation mode where you work your way up from the Corolla to the Corvette, purchasing all the shocks and brake pads in between. Even if you don't understand what souped-up Civics and pit stops are all about, *GT4* will have you hooked in under 60 seconds. *S*



"Uh, yeah, hello, OnStar..."



Full Spectrum Warrior

Otherwise, the terrorists have won

Publisher

THQ

Developer

Pandemic

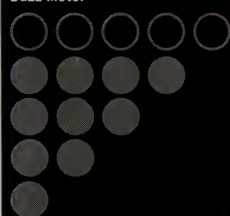
Genre

Action

Release Date

2004

Buzz Meter



PC | Xbox

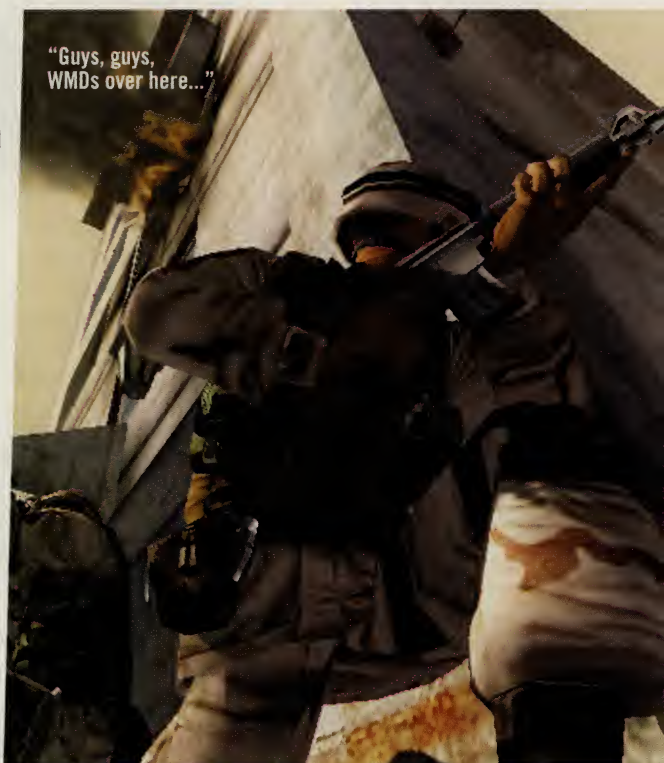
A year ago, the United States military commissioned *Full Spectrum Command*, a video game that was used to train light infantrymen in urban combat situations, as well as *America's Army*, a free online game used to recruit potential soldiers. The games proved so authentic that THQ has developed *Full Spectrum Warrior*, an action strategy game based entirely on the U.S. Military's plunge into gaming.

As a squad commander leading Alpha and Bravo fire teams, you must complete specific military missions in hostile environments without having to send anyone home in a pine box.

FSW is more authentic than any other military strategy game as judged by its core technology alone—this online-enabled title was programmed for real soldiers training for live hostile environments. That means the squad-based, tactical-action gameplay requires more thought than cojones, and trigger-happy lovers of *Contra* need not apply.

Your two teams are enhanced by a strong A.I., which simulates actual reactions in the thick of battle. You're not being placed in quiet neighborhoods, waiting for the action to come to you while verbally throwing out the occasional "Roger," "Over," and "Niner." The action is intense, some even too rough for the standard infantry squad.

You have to lead your men and successfully



complete your missions, but you'll need to properly manage your resources, otherwise you'll be using your empty rifles as clubs instead of firearms. As in the real military, following standard Rules of Engagement is imperative, meaning you'll need to be sensitive to the indigenous culture and the people you're fighting against.

Your country needs you, son, so get moving. <



Thief III

More men in tights

Publisher

Eidos

Developer

Ion Storm

Genre

Stealth Action

Release Date

TBA

Buzz Meter

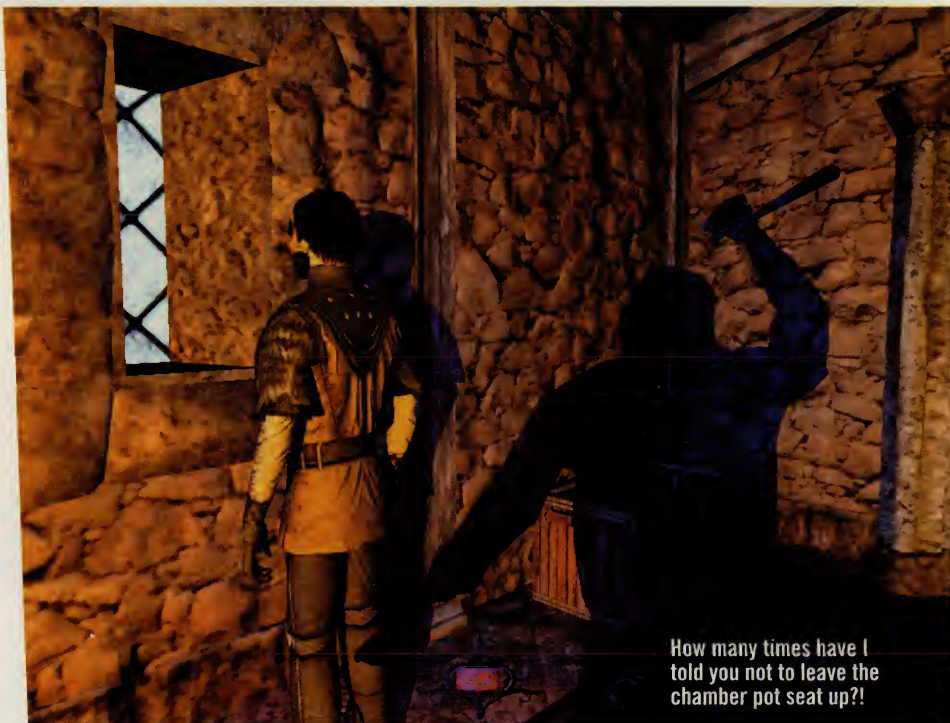


PC | Xbox

After Ion Storm picked up the *Thief* franchise in the wake of Looking Glass Studios' demise, they wanted to build on its two predecessors while attracting new gamers to the stealth action-adventure title.

As Garrett, you are the world's best thief, never seen and never caught. Sure, Garrett might not be the best name for a master thief, but the game takes place several centuries ago, when everyone had weak names like Charlemagne and Lancelot. In a dark and corrupt medieval city, Garrett steals from the wealthy noblemen who prey on the town's hoi polloi. He then takes his newfound riches and gives them to... himself.

The story revolves primarily around an impending dark age that Garrett is determined to stop. With a little help from the cultish Keepers, Garrett must steal from the town's castles, cathedrals, and museums to compile the artifacts needed to fight the Darkness. In doing so, Garrett accidentally unearths (another) unspeakable evil,



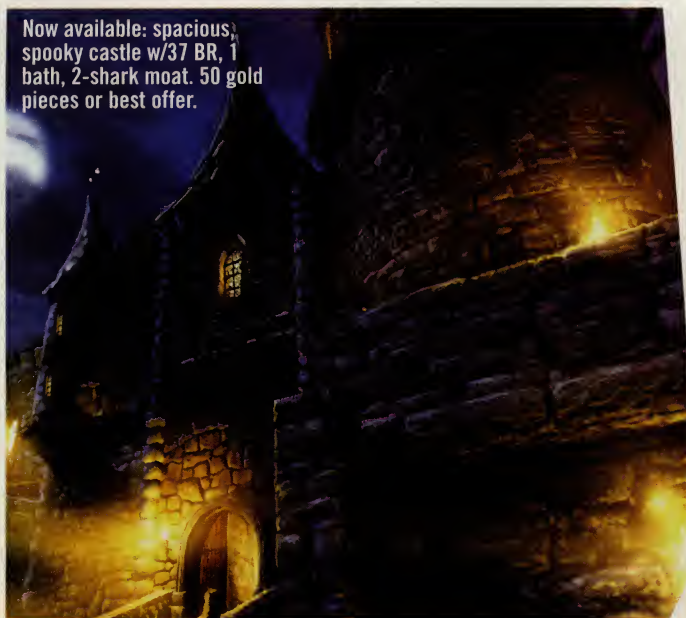
How many times have I told you not to leave the chamber pot seat up?!

and his Keeper pals suddenly turn on him out of fear and suspicion. Now you've got to put those thieving skills to more practical use.

Unlike most first-person games, *Thief* is all about your sneaky methodology. With sharp stealth gameplay and a large arsenal of thieving tools—including lock picks, daggers, and flash bombs—you must sneak through a sprawling city, trespassing, mugging, and stealing your way to a comfortable retirement. Oh yeah, and preserving the well being of all mankind.

Don't rely on faulty A.I. to help you out here; *Thief III* is armed with the *Deus Ex 2* engine and enemy A.I. Should the various guards around the city see and hear you, they'll track you down like the thieving dog you are. ☺

Now available: spacious, spooky castle w/37 BR, 1 bath, 2-shark moat. 50 gold pieces or best offer.



Jade Empire

Finally, a martial arts RPG

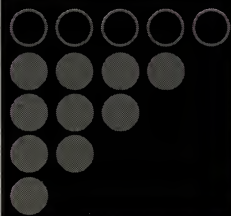
Publisher
Microsoft Game Studios

Developer
BioWare

Genre
RPG

Release Date
2004

Buzz Meter



Xbox

If BioWare's *Knights of the Old Republic* can be used as a benchmark, the Xbox exclusive *Jade Empire* should be equally grand, if not better.

Set in the folklore of Ancient China, you play as a fully customizable arts student training under a master, like Karate Kid, but without the stomach-churning earnestness. As you train in the safe confines of the monastery, evil is getting stronger outside and spirits are attacking villages. During meditation, you see images of a village being destroyed by the hideously masked Death's Hand, who also murders your father. As you set off to uncover what's happening and avenge your father's death, you develop your fighting style during monster battles to become a master yourself. Travels will take you from the monastery to mythic locales, like the Land of the Howling Spirits and the Imperial Palace.

Jade Empire's gameplay bears a strong resemblance to *KOTOR*. You determine your character's look, voice, and skills, with an emphasis on magic, strength, speed, or a combination of the three. As the game progresses, you pick up new skills and weapons. You must choose between good and evil, just as you would with your Jedi. Playable characters will include the lightning-quick Furious Ming and the magic-wielding Wu the Lotus Blossom.

The game features agents who are non-playable characters that rally on your side, but others are enemies who join you for their own nefarious purposes. You can send your agents on missions, and some agents are better skilled than others on certain assignments. Henpecked Ho will help feed you and make

Global warming—the early years.



important contacts, while Chai Ka, the Heavenly Gate Guardian, will use his primal strength in battle.

Jade Empire will feature new graphics and sound engines, more render paths, and better character animation than *KOTOR*. But the story is even more fantastical, and if BioWare delivers a game as open-ended as *KOTOR*, it will have another hit on its hands. *S*



"Someone is gonna pay for these splinters."

Kingdom Hearts II

Disney's never been so dark

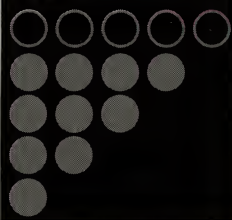
Publisher
Square Enix

Developer
Square Enix

Genre
Action RPG

Release Date
TBA

Buzz Meter



PS2



Disney World on really, really bad acid.



Picking up where the original *Kingdom Hearts* left off, a cliffhanger that left many gamers wanting more, *Kingdom Hearts II* welcomes the return of Sora, Kairi, and Riku along with many classic Disney characters and worlds. The original *KH* was the top-selling action RPG of 2002, bringing gamers into a variety of bizarre levels straight out of Walt Disney's films. The mosaic of over 100 different classic Disney characters made the game endearing to Disney fans, while Square's design and gameplay made it a huge hit on PlayStation 2.

Though having characters from the *Final Fantasy* and Disney worlds in the same title begs the obvious question "What are these guys on?" the first game was amazing, and *Kingdom Hearts II* looks like it's staying true to the formula of the original.

The game sees the return of the Heartless, a horde of minions who suck the life energy out of the interconnected worlds. During your quest you'll gain all the spells and abilities of classic role-playing games, but *KHII* has a more action-oriented, *Zelda*-like approach to keep gameplay moving.

If you're a diehard *FF* fan looking for the same RPG experience, you might be disappointed, as the game focuses slightly more on the Disney element. But the game provides the amazing polish only Square is known for, and should provide hours of fun going head to head with some of Disney's most famous villains. Who hasn't wanted to kick Captain Hook's ass at some point in time? ☺

Area 51

The truth: here?

Publisher
Midway

Developer
Midway

Genre
FPS

Release Date
2004

Buzz Meter



PS2 | Xbox

Forget Mars or some planetary ring in the future. Midway revisits an alien-infested place right in our backyard, *Area 51*. The first-person shooter for the Xbox and PS2 features an epic single-player mode, and multiplayer combat via system link or online play.

Something bad has happened at Area 51—as it always does—and we're not talking about some spy breaking in for sensitive data. As Lt. Nick Cross, a hazardous biological waste expert, you are sent in for a routine investigation—or so you



thought. Not only are there the cliched aliens to deal with, but you also become infected with a mutagen that turns you into something a Beverly Hills surgeon can't even fix. For your survival, and the world's, you must uncover what the hell is going on.

While the real Area 51 is shrouded in mystery, giving Midway leeway in terms of plot, the game sticks to the old alien vs. human theme and features a gameplay and story line not too different from *Half-Life*, *Halo*, or *Doom*. You guide Cross through the dark corridors of eight sections of the facility as he explores the alien's secrets (and those of his government), finds a cure for what's transforming him, and prevents the world from facing the same fate. Cross has access to more than 15 kinds of weapons, some alien, some human. As he's slowly changing form, Cross possesses new physical abilities, which will come in handy as he faces butt-ugly creatures that want to do him harm.

You know the aliens will be freaky if Stan Winston, creature designer for the films *Aliens*, *Predator*, and *Jurassic Park*, lent his talents to the drawing board. Add the original score from former Nine Inch Nails member Chris Vrenna, and this game should be a worthy sci-fi contender. *C*



NFL Street

What'd you say about my momma?!?!

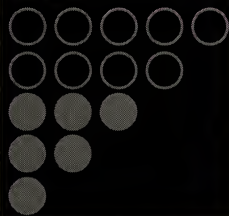
Publisher
EA Sports

Developer
Electronic Arts Tiburon

Genre
Sports

Release Date
Q1 2004

Buzz Meter



GC | PS2 | PC | Xbox

Though the football sims on the market offer fantastic gameplay, there's something to be said for a good game of backyard football. After the success of *NBA Street*, EA turns to the NFL to bring football back to the people.

If the NFL had reservations about Midway's *NFL Blitz*, it's a wonder EA got a license for *NFL Street*. The seven-on-seven games place special emphasis on unsportsmanlike conduct, including devastating hits and showboating that even Terrell Owens hasn't imagined.

The game features three gameplay modes: a single-game exhibition, an NFL challenge mode (similar to a season mode), and a pick-up game mode. In season and challenge mode, you choose a team and select which seven players will take the field. Just like it should be, no kickers are allowed.

Before a pick-up game, you select your seven players from a pool of NFL stars by alternating picks. There are no positional rules, so if you want Randy Moss to stay in and block while Chris



The Buc stops here.



Hovan plays quarterback, it's your call, though the results may be catastrophic. Your guys play offense and defense, so athleticism is the name of the game.

The player caricatures and environments are highly detailed, and lend a comic-like sense to the action. The varying fields each have their own characteristics; while some are open fields of grass with obstacles like park benches, others are played on narrow lengths of dirt between tenement buildings, or on the beach.

Much of the game plays like *Madden*, though there are dedicated buttons for showboating and a turbo boost.

NFL Street is shaping up to be the pick-up-and-play arcade football title people have dreamed about for years. ☺

The Force Is Strong With This One

BioWare's mind-bending *Knights of the Old Republic* has managed to make *Star Wars* cool again, but the dev team had more than its fair share of dark side days.



Dark and light side only? Jolee may be the first Jedi to openly address the gray zone between the polar opposites of the Force.

A

"A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..."

Actually, 1999 wasn't that long ago. That's when BioWare began its journey to bring us the best *Star Wars* game to date. LucasArts' then-head of development, Simon Jeffries, contacted BioWare about the prospect of collaborating on a character-based role-playing game (RPG) in a universe chockfull of Jedi knights, bounty hunters, and space battles.

In typical *Star Wars* fashion, *Knights of the Old Republic* puts the main character in the unenviable position of having to save the universe. Just like any RPG, your character starts off with basic skills and items. But you don't become a regular knight armed with a sword and shield—you train to become a lightsaber-wielding Jedi knight.

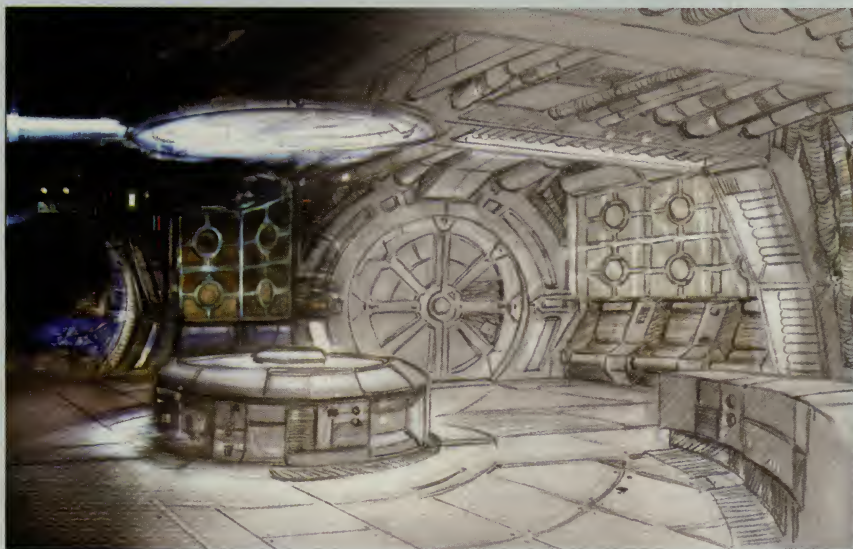
KOTOR features a unique dilemma that goes deeper than determining which are the right skills and weapons to improve: whether to follow the light or dark side of the Force. For instance, most conversations that take place in the game offer various lines of dialogue, and depending on the line you prompt your character to say, there will be an accompanying slide toward the light or dark side. Combat offers the same level of variety and opportunity to affect the outcome, as you can solve problems peacefully or with fists and lightsabers, and the differences between the two sides of the Force become more pronounced the further into the game you play.

Vision Quest

Before *KOTOR* got off the ground, BioWare had proven its RPG chops with such creations as *Baldur's Gate* and *Neverwinter Nights*. And BioWare was pumped, not only for the chance to take a shot at making a *Star Wars* game, but also because it was looking for new projects. At the time that Jeffries contacted BioWare, one of its teams had just completed a project, which meant



Darth Malik's self-portrait. Dark Jedi make great artists, too.



You can only travel with two party members at a time, so the rest of your mates chill on the ship.

they were ready to take on a new challenge.

"I think one of the biggest factors is getting the right team to do [a *Star Wars* RPG]. The right team is a team that has some experience doing RPGs in particular, and has a passion for sitting down and working on a game that you know in the end is going to be a 40-hour experience," said Mike Gallo, *KOTOR*'s producer at LucasArts. "It does take a specific talent and a specific group to put something like that together. When the opportunity came up to work with BioWare, it was like, 'Hey, we want to make a *Star Wars* RPG, and we haven't been able to. Now we have a team that's just coming free, and they may be able to do this.'"

KOTOR wasn't publicly announced until July 2000, but by then there had already been substantial progress with the game. It was still in the early story-creation and design mode, however, and would be for most of the next year.

"One of the things that made the game really strong was, even from that very early time, we had a very clear vision of what we were going to make," said Dr. Greg Zeschuk, joint CEO at BioWare and co-executive producer on *KOTOR*. "We all sat down and formulated a vision statement for the game, which was to recreate the magic of the movies—to feel like you're playing *through* a movie in the video game."

The Plot Thickens

The game was set in a time period apart from that of the movies, which enabled the designers to explore new characters and settings. While all story-related elements had to be approved by LucasArts (with a nod by the big guns at Skywalker Ranch), there was a lot of latitude provided to carve out new territory in the *Star Wars* universe, without having to be restricted by the stories that had already been told.

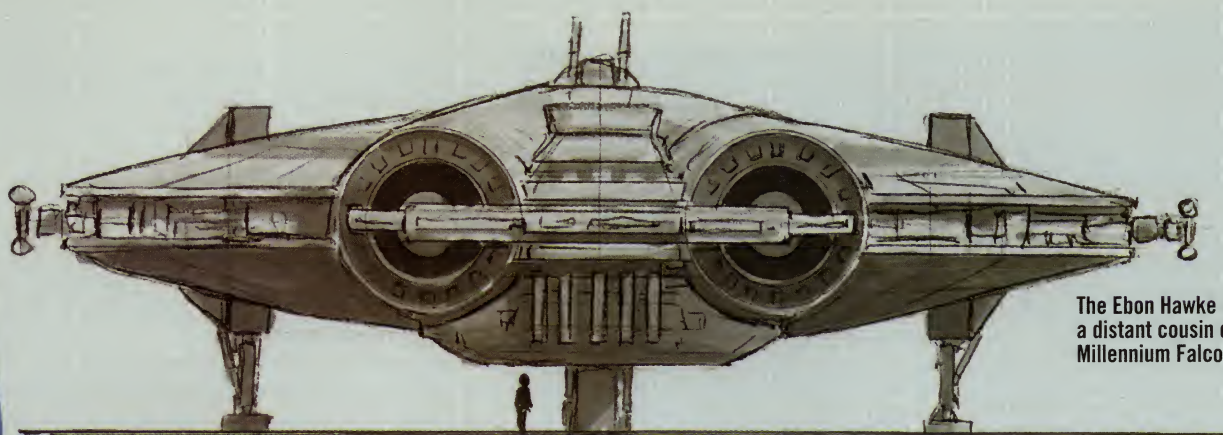


The Mandalorians were bad asses even 4,000 years before Boba Fett.

X Marks the Box

After the essential business dealings and contract negotiations were completed, BioWare and LucasArts went to work on putting together the first elements of the game. *KOTOR* had been planned as a PC and "next-generation console" game, but after the companies' engineers had a chance to evaluate the systems, they picked the Xbox as the console target.

"When it all comes down to it, the style of game that we wanted to build and needed to be built could only have been on the Xbox, just because of the hard drive and some of the abilities the Xbox has," Gallo noted. "It was also an easier switchover for the team, because the bulk of that team had worked on PC products."



The Ebon Hawke looks like a distant cousin of the Millennium Falcon.

The storymaking process started with some small meetings between BioWare and LucasArts. Initially, the concept was to come up with and agree upon a simple plot thread that would carry the player through the game. The team could then build from there.

"We basically wanted something that would allow the details within the game to really capture what we think is the classic *Star Wars* story," said Casey Hudson, producer/project director for *KOTOR* at BioWare, "something along the lines of *Empire Strikes Back*, where you have a rich story that's wrapped around something that's fundamentally simple. A classic villain and a hero and some kind of epic twist."

The story structure came via lead designer James Ohlen and senior writer Drew Karpysyn at BioWare. Hudson noted that Karpysyn is particularly fast and prolific, having worked on stories and books prior to being hired by the Canadian developer. Though the project was a three-year epic, Hudson is thankful for their early and ongoing contributions—and he's clear in dishing kudos on the quality and quantity that they churned out in short order: The story outline, which would guide development through the project, came together in about two months during the summer of 2000.

"It's hard to find writers, because they have to be very, very good," Hudson stated. "Not only are the lines going to be spoken by actors, but they have to sound real, they have to sound funny when they need to be, they have to be able to draw emotions. [The writers] have to put in a lot of work."

Regarding the "epic twist" to which Hudson referred, he again pointed to a previous *Star Wars* film for inspiration on how *KOTOR* would play out—not that BioWare is new at formulating this kind of turn in the story.

"If you look at *Empire Strikes Back* as a prototypical *Star Wars* movie, that also had the killer twist in it. If that's part of the formula, that's something we wanted to have in our game," he

said. "That's something we've tried to do before, as well: to have something at the end that opens the story into something bigger and better than what you thought you were playing."

By the fall of 2000, Hudson said that the team "basically knew what game we were making," and once the story elements fell in place, they could design the game around it. In a few months' time, by March 2001, the "design feel" for the game was settled upon, and work began on fleshing out the characters that would occupy the world.

Hearing Voices

Summer 2002 brought the lengthy process of creating the script that would be used for the ambitious voice-acting requirements. According to Gallo, the game ended up with 20,000 lines of spoken dialogue. While that alone is a daunting task, the writers also had to set the stage, so to speak, so the voice actors would know the situation in which their characters were saying the lines, to whom they're being spoken, and so on. Gallo estimates that the final script ended up being closer to ten times the size of just the spoken lines themselves.

"Early on in the design process, when you identify something, you go, 'Wow, this is going to be a big feature,' or 'Wow, this is a lot of voice work,'" Gallo said in retrospect. "Whenever you can make that comment early on, you need to realize that, if it's going to be that big, it's going to be that much bigger of a problem. The voice work, in particular; we underestimated it, there's no two ways about it."

By October 2002, *KOTOR*'s makers had the script 90 percent locked, and they were aware they'd need a second voice session late in the project. Concurrently, work on the main sound and music elements had begun, with storyboards of the game and its cut scenes going to the composer, Jeremy Soule. But how can the composer create the audio backing for a section of the game without seeing exactly what was going on?

Hey, Remember When?

In any game project, there are stories that the player doesn't get to enjoy when the power is flipped on and the software is loaded up to play. However, they're as much a part of the development process as the art, music, sound effects, and programming code. They're truly behind-the-scenes developments, and generally recalled over drinks years later as fond remembrances of the good old days. Here's some of what LucasArts and BioWare will reminisce about over *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*:

► When the story was first being created, there was a different plot than what ended up in the final version.

"We had a clone in one of the first story treatments—your character was a clone, and you didn't have your memory because you were a clone," said Mike Gallo. "At the time, George Lucas was in the middle of writing *Episode II*. So, we're passing some of these story ideas to the [Skywalker] Ranch just to get some quick feedback, and they said, 'You can't do this.' But, they wouldn't tell us why. It became obvious, though." After figuring out that they had accidentally encroached upon the *Episode II* storyline, BioWare came up with a different scenario for KOTOR's main character.

► The Trask character was the last voice-acting work completed, mainly because his lines were integral to the player learning how to navigate through KOTOR's interface in the game's first stages. If his lines had been recorded earlier and interface elements subsequently changed, those lines would have to be redone to reflect the new button combinations. Therefore, the Trask recording was done well after the interface had been locked down.

► The voice acting for another character, Canderous Ordo, was totally rerecorded. Apparently, after listening to the first version of him for hours on end in gameplay testing, some people on the project found him over the top and grating, perhaps too much the gung-ho soldier. Gallo thought the original voice was fine, but knew it would take only a day's work to do a second take.

► When the voice acting was being recorded, if a minor line had to be done over or a late-addition quest was determined to be a must-have, the character delivering the dialogue was made an alien. That way, gibberish text in the form of an alien language could be used, sparing the developers and actors from having to go back into the studio again for what would likely be a costly voiceover session.

► Some of the mini-games went through a lot of iterations. The swoop racing wasn't fun in its early form, but it became more entertaining in time. The Ebon Hawk gunner battles started out to be fun, but seemed to lose some of their appeal as the project wore on.

The strangest attraction was the Pazaak card game, which has the simplest design (no 3D in there), but was well loved by the testers and, after its release, by the player community. There was a period when the computer won too often, but that was tweaked to a more reasonable difficulty level.

► Near the end of the project, BioWare had some trouble keeping its office cool—especially with the team working long hours and weekends. As a result, many portable air-conditioning units were purchased, but Drs. Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk had to set up a shaved-ice snow cones machine to hand out cool treats on demand. Later, a large freezer was installed and loaded with Popsicles, letting developers get a cold fix whenever they wanted.

► It's a common thing for developers to play other games during breaks away from the main project. BioWare was a hotbed for *Soul Calibur* matches, and it's a good thing *Soul Calibur II* hadn't come out before *KOTOR*, or else the *Star Wars* game might have been further delayed. Also, perhaps because it's a polar opposite to *KOTOR*, some of the developers became immersed in multiplayer *Worms Blast* contests.

"It was important to feed him those things as he was composing," Gallo noted. "If you couldn't visualize it, you couldn't score it."

Your Bugs Are No Match for the Force!

The plan at that point was to have a playable version of the game by December 2000. The expectation was that this version would have plenty of bugs, but it would represent a key milestone: All the features would be locked down and most of the remaining work would be devoted to fixing the bugs that the quality assurance (QA) people found.

Just before the Christmas break, Gallo noted that they had a version of the game ready for the team to "spend some time with...to play through it to see if it was fun." As he noted, it was an interesting process because they knew *KOTOR* wasn't finished, so they needed to "look past certain things," but they had to view it with an eye for things that should be fun and should work in the game.

Using that early version, they realized that the combat system was a good idea and worked pretty well, but its interface was clumsy and needed help. In January, they used feedback from the QA departments at LucasArts and BioWare and brainstormed the combat interface on a regular basis. It's also when Gallo "decided that I was going to go spend the rest of my life up in Canada." It was grueling work, and he noted that the team would have meetings every other day to go through the interface page by page, a process that would end up continuing with each new version of the game through May.

Crunch Time

May brought the E3 showing on the eve of the game's release without hands-on gameplay for attendees. Gallo ended up being the only member of the LucasArts *KOTOR* team at the show, while the remainder of the crew plugged away on completing the project. A June launch date was just around the corner, but appeared to be doable.

The project was at the point where the effort was concentrated on bug fixing, but Gallo claims that by the time the game was completed and in stores, over 33,000 bugs had been logged into the database and fixed—three times more than any other game he had worked on. The team worked 14- to 20-hour days to clean up the game.

In the end, *KOTOR* went through the Microsoft approval process—the final "nerve-racking" step that Gallo equates to "sending your baby off to someone else"—and shipped to stores in mid-July. Since then, it's been one of the best reviewed games of the year, achieving a score in the mid-90s on the Game Rankings review archive site.

Despite its good ratings, *KOTOR* has had its share of criticism over the bugs that managed to make it into the final version, including one that can lock the game if the main character tries to free other party members while in Stealth mode. Gallo is philosophical about problems that might come up for players.

"We've certainly had an expected number of phone calls about [bugs]—actually less than one percent, which for any game is what you expect—and we've also had people who've played through the game ten times and had no problems," he said emphatically. "I would actually say that this is the cleanest game I've ever worked on. We shipped the game with zero known issues that were what we would consider 'showstoppers' or detrimental to gameplay."

BioWare's Hudson also stated that *KOTOR* pushes the hardware pretty hard, which can bring about unintended and unforeseen glitches.

"Our game is probably doing more simultaneously than most games, if not almost all games that are out there," Hudson indicated. "We're streaming in several things and we're loading and unloading...we're really hammering the DVD drive quite a bit."

Additionally, *KOTOR* offers what Hudson sees as a never-before-offered level of freedom for the gamer. Having a movie-like game, with the ability for the player to view or wander in any direction, is a challenge. It also makes it unlikely that all holes can be spotted and filled.

"Games that have a huge amount of freedom and the ability to go anywhere and look at anything are going to have more oddities" Hudson said. "If you constrain the game to very strict parameters, like if it's linear, you can look at each particular area from only one camera angle—and there's a lot of games like that—then you're much less likely [to have bugs]. We wanted people to be able to see anything from any angle, go up and talk to anyone in any situation, to fight anywhere in the game. And, you can save anywhere you want. You can save in the middle of combat. A lot of that is unprecedented, especially on a console."

Real Replay Value

Dr. Ray Muzyka, joint CEO at BioWare and co-executive producer on *KOTOR*, claimed that a lot of the game's developers have continued to play the game well after its release, finding it just as fun to try out new paths or different strategies. That's the mark of a good game—its makers still haven't tired of it after months of development and are willing to play it as if they were average consumers.

The ability to play a character with varying degrees of "light side" or "dark side" lends itself to

If you play your cards right, you may be able to score with Bastila. Bad Jedi!

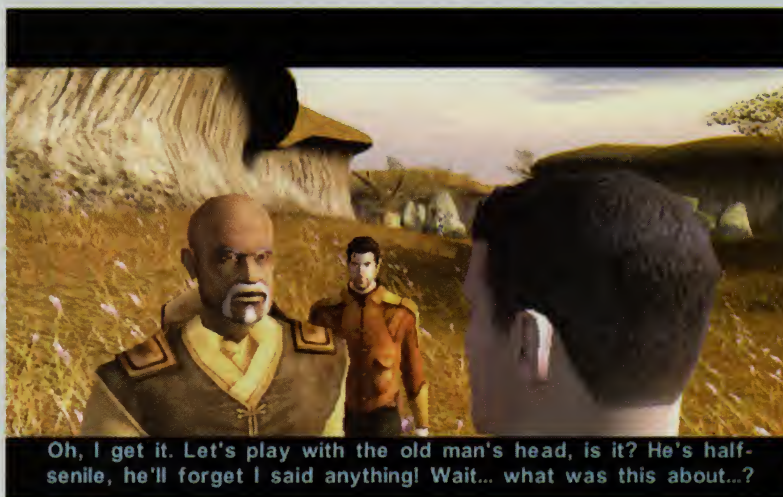
"OUR GAME IS PROBABLY DOING MORE SIMULTANEOUSLY THAN MOST GAMES, IF NOT ALMOST ALL GAMES THAT ARE OUT THERE."

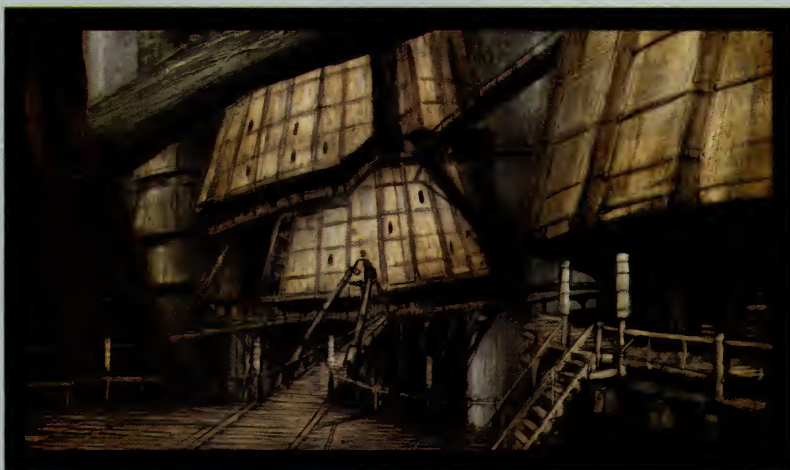
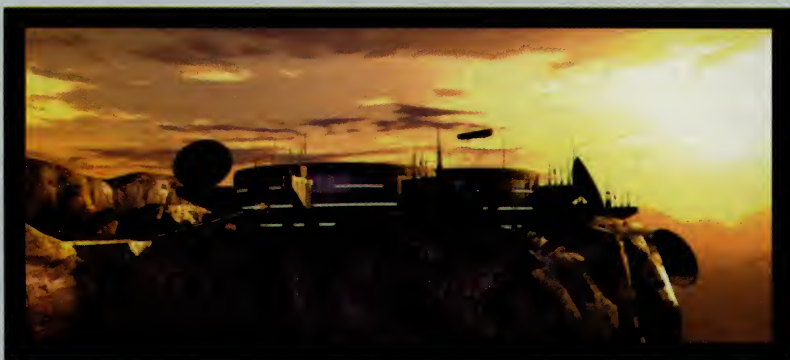
trying out alternate responses and actions to see what will happen differently. That those so close to the project were often discovering those nuances as they played it makes it much more interesting.

"They played it light side, and they were playing it dark side instead," Muzyka said. "Or they heard about some cool things they missed, so they were trying to make another pass through to try out a new type of lightsaber crystal, or try a new Force power, or try to find a secret area in the game."

"You realize that, if the people that made it are that much into playing it," Zeschuk added, "you're

As you converse with your party members, you may unlock additional side missions.





During your journeys in *KOTOR*, you'll visit several noteworthy planets rendered visually for the first time, such as the Sith stronghold Korriban (top), and the Wookiee home of Kashyyyk (above).

really onto something, because they're usually the most jaded, critical people. If they're enjoying it and having fun and playing it after the game is done, you touched on something."

As with any game development process, there are lessons and resolutions to be drawn from the grueling experience. Muzyka believes *KOTOR* is his company's best game so far, but that "there are areas we can improve on. Each game we make has to be better than the ones in the past."

"Making great games is hard," Zeschuk added. "As a company, we're dedicated to that, and we work really hard to make something that's really good. We're innovating a lot, we're evolving a lot, and we're learning a lot."

An obvious question is whether the two companies will collaborate on a *KOTOR* follow-up. If the game industry's recent history of sequel madness is any indicator, it'll be a lock. However, neither BioWare nor LucasArts would provide any early details.

"We've been asked about a sequel since we started this one—which I think was kind of funny," LucasArts' Gallo said with a laugh. "Obviously, we want to continue this in some way if there's a possibility of doing it. We don't have anything official to talk about yet, but it's certainly something we want to do. It'd be a shame to not go back to this universe and this time period that the BioWare guys have created and do something more."

With *Episode III* not slated to hit theaters until May 2005, a new *KOTOR* hitting store shelves before that would make for a lot of happy *Star Wars* fans. ☺



KOTOR is the most Force-rich game in the *Star Wars* library. Just ask these fallen Dark Jedi.

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Nokia N-Gage



Two mobile consoles

deathmatch



Just when you thought Nintendo's Game Boy was the only mobile console in town, two newcomers—one with more hype behind it than the *Matrix* sequels, the other with about much buzz as Axl Rose's revival—have arrived to take a swing at the champ. In one corner we have the Nokia

Tapwave Zodiac

fight for the right to

be your pocket arcade.

N-Gage



By far the best game available for the N-Gage, *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* supplies plenty of 3D thrills and a bangin' soundtrack.



SonicN isn't chock-full of surprises but it stays true to ol' Spikey Hair's fast run-and-jump gameplay.



Don't raid this Tomb. Awkward controls and cramped camera angles make this port anything but a pleasure.

N-Gage (\$199), a combination wireless multiplayer game deck, cell phone, MP3 player, and FM radio. (Can opener attachment sold separately.) In the other corner you'll find the Tapwave Zodiac (\$299 for the 32MB version, \$399 for the 128MB model), an unassuming, souped-up Palm PDA with a playful double personality.

DESIGN

N-Gage

We won't bore you with the tedious details here (see *Rules of N-Gagement* sidebar), but all you need to know is that this thing forces you to remove the included headset, cover, and battery each and every time you want to swap out games. With the MMC game cards themselves being the size of a guitar pick, that's way too much to juggle when you're on the go, never mind plopped down on your futon.

But wait, it gets better! This whole process requires you to turn on and then turn off the N-Gage, which takes a good 30 seconds.

On the plus side, the N-Gage is quite pocketable, weighing less than five ounces and measuring less than an inch thick. During our month of testing, we never felt the device cramped our style. We like the quick-launch buttons for the MP3 player, radio, and main menu, as well as the raised 5 and 7 action buttons for gaming. Plus, the crisp, 4,096-color display looks great indoors and in direct sunlight.

Too bad the N-Gage seems to sabotage itself at every turn. Where are the shoulder buttons for more advanced moves? Where is the analog joystick for more controlled movements? This glaring omission made itself painfully obvious while playing *Tomb Raider*, which requires gamers to use the D-pad to run and the 8 button on the dial pad to walk. An analog joystick would let you walk or run based simply on the amount of pressure applied. At least the D-pad has a press-to-select feature to speed up navigation (which the Zodiac also has).

As for the 208 x 176-pixel display, some games play just fine (like *Sonic* and *MotoGP*), while others feel downright claustrophobic (*Tomb Raider* and *Monkey Ball*). Throw in the lack of a dedicated volume control and at times we wondered whether the N-Gage is a poorly executed practical joke.

Zodiac

In a word: elegant. Yes, we're talking about a gaming device, but, in this instance, being the opposite of garish isn't a bad thing. This Game Boy in Palm's clothing sports a sleek charcoal skin, a gorgeous display that's more than twice the size of the N-Gage, and all the right buttons in all the right places. Plus, you'll find two Secure Digital card

Zodiac

slots (for the games or for other media files) on top of the device—no open-heart surgery required. At 6.3 ounces, the Zodiac weighs noticeably more than the N-Gage, but it also feels better in the hand, whether you're using it as a gameplayer or organizer.

Next to Nokia's five-way D-pad, the analog control on the Zodiac is a godsend. Push a little forward and you'll go a little forward. Push a lot to the right and you'll move quickly in that direction. Even when you're not playing the analog control comes in handy. The menu screens branch out, so you can easily select what app you want to open by simply pointing in that direction. You can remap menus by clicking and dragging icons with the included stylus.

Along the left side are the Power button (recessed just enough so you won't shut down accidentally), a secondary menu button, and a Home button that takes you back to the main menu at any time.

On the other side of the display are four action buttons, complemented by two shoulder buttons along the top. There's a Bluetooth button above the screen that lets you toggle it on and off quickly to save battery life, something the N-Gage lacks.

The 3.8-inch, 480 x 320 touchscreen display also puts the N-Gage to shame.

It's big, bold, and beautiful. With more than 65,000 colors at its disposal, we love how the games look as well as still images loaded from our digital camera. As a digital photo frame, the Zodiac can't be beat.

Other nice touches include a carved slot for the stylus (which you probably won't use often), a flip-down leather cover that protects the screen perfectly, and a little cutout to attach a hand strap.

DESIGN WINNER

Zodiac, by a mile.

FEATURES

N-Gage

Here's where the N-Gage starts to redeem itself. Thanks to built-in Bluetooth, players can go head-to-head with certain titles, like



Neverwinter Nights lets you take control of your PC-based characters and work your magic on the go.



Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4 for the Zodiac offers crisp, clean graphics and wireless play for up to four peeps via Bluetooth.

SpyHunter puts you inside a G-6155 Interceptor, which instantly morphs from a smoke screen-spewing car into to a rocket-launching speedboat.



Rules of N-Gagement

Changing games on Nokia's game deck is like changing a diaper. It's messy, not fun, and you wish someone else would do it. (Except you don't have to turn a baby on and off for it to crap again.) Anyway, follow this "easy" guide if you want to keep your sanity.

STEP 1

Commence pouting. Now, turn the N-Gage off.

STEP 2

Remove the headset. If you don't have the headset plugged in, go right to step 3.

STEP 3

Press the button on the back cover and slide it off gently. Almost halfway there.

STEP 4

Pop out the battery. Why? Because Nokia hates you.

STEP 5

Slide out the game card. If you don't have a third hand, you can place it in your lap.

STEP 6

Put in the new game, re-insert the battery, and put the cover back on. Yes, we combined three steps.

STEP 7

Press the Power button and wait 25 to 30 seconds for the N-Gage to come back to life. Pass the time by cursing.

STEP 8

Time to play! Or is it time for bed?

Pandemonium, without a wire in sight. Think you're the best on your block—or at least your street corner? Just turn Bluetooth on in the Tools menu and decide whether you want to host or join a game. We had some doubts about whether Bluetooth had enough bandwidth to keep up with the onscreen action, but the N-Gage performs quite admirably.

Because the N-Gage happens to be a relatively capable GSM/GPRS cell phone, you'll be able to play against virtual foes across the country on select games via the N-Gage Arena service, which rides on T-Mobile's data network. You can download tips, tricks, cheats, and walkthroughs. Just be sure T-Mobile has good service in your area. Our signal strength varied wildly both in New York and during a three-day trip to San Diego.

As a phone the N-Gage falls flat. People on the other end of our calls said we sounded like we were under water or talking through a tin can. Gabbing without the headset, which means holding the wedge-shaped device up to your ear, is not recommended unless you want to be committed.

Otherwise, the N-Gage is stacked with features. The FM radio is surprisingly powerful, letting you automatically tune up and down, save stations, and record audio if you have a blank MMC card inserted. Most games let you use the radio as a soundtrack for your game, so you can listen to Top 40 while you save the universe. The MP3 player leaves a little more to be desired, as it requires that you swap out whatever game you're playing for an MMC card since the N-Gage has only 3.4MB of internal memory. (Tapwave offers 32MB on the Zodiac 1 and 128MB on the Zodiac 2). At least you can rip songs right off your CDs using the line-in port.

What else can the N-Gage do? Provided you've got a decent signal, this gizmo can surf the wireless Web with ease, letting you bookmark your favorite sites and catch up on your e-mail. The Zodiac, on the other hand, can't pull this trick

off without the aid of a separate Bluetooth cell phone, which would double as a modem. Another exclusive feature: You can grab screenshots from your game while it's in progress and send it to other N-Gage users via MMS to show off your high score. When it's time to work you can rest assured that the bundled PC Suite software enables you to sync contacts and to-dos with Outlook.

Zodiac

The Zodiac is Bluetooth-enabled, meaning you can challenge up to seven other people wirelessly if the game you're playing supports it. Don't expect to challenge someone across town or around the world, however; the Zodiac is not a phone and doesn't feature the needed connectivity. At least, not natively. With a Bluetooth cell phone you could at least use that to connect to the Web to post your high scores.

Unique features include Yamaha-powered audio for better in-game sounds and MP3 playback, as well as vibration effects to let you feel the onscreen action. While the N-Gage offers the RealOne media player, the Zodiac answers back with its Kinoma player. *The Matrix: Reloaded* movie trailer loaded onto our pre-production unit played smooth and fast. The music player faired even better, pumping out clean, crisp audio at surprisingly high volumes.

What gives the Zodiac so much potential for multimedia greatness is its dual-processor architecture. The Motorola i.MX1 ARM9 processor, optimized for multimedia apps and Bluetooth, provides a good balance of power and performance. The ATI Imageon graphics accelerator, coupled with the FatHammer X-Forge 3D graphics engine, helps the Zodiac deliver eye-popping 2D and 3D content.

Since the Zodiac is based on Palm OS 5.2, you get a great organizer. There's the classic Address, To Do List, Memo Pad, and Date Book, but Tapwave throws in a couple cool extras, including an alarm clock, PhatPad (so you can pass notes via Bluetooth to other Zodiac or Bluetooth Palm owners), a graphing calculator, and a word processing app.

Last but not least, Zodiac offers better expandability than the N-Gage. Not only can the Zodiac support up to 1GB of memory via its two SD slots, it supports the SDIO standard, which means you can plug in any number of peripherals, from megapixel digital cameras to Wi-Fi radios.



Just like Operation

FEATURES WINNER

Even with the N-Gage's ambitious online gameplay option, the edge goes to the more powerful Zodiac.

GAMES

N-Gage

On paper, this round isn't even close. With heavy hitters like EA, Activision, Sega, THQ, and more in its corner, we couldn't help but be impressed with Nokia's launch lineup, though it's nowhere near the Game Boy's deep arsenal. Some titles (most of which cost \$30 to \$40) are basic ports of PlayStation games, but when you consider how pocketable the N-Gage is, you have to give it some props for delivering a 3D—or at least a 2.5D—experience anywhere.

SonicN is largely predictable, but it stays true to Sega's fast and fun side-scrolling formula. Meanwhile, *MLB Slam* shines mostly in the batter's box with smooth animation and tight controls; however, the players shrink to vintage '86 Nintendo size when the ball reaches the field. Although *Virtua Tennis* remains faithful to the Dreamcast hit, the AI on the early version we played wouldn't let us win one match in easy mode.

Things really got interesting when our copy of *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* arrived. We grinded, ollied, and got totally vertical on many a ramp and kept coming back for more. We even happily tolerated the cluttered controls (2 for rail slide, 5 for jump, etc.). With a dose of rap-rock playing in the background, for the first time we were totally immersed. *MotoGP* also lives up to the adrenaline-pumping original, with blistering straightaways and knee-scraping turns.

As a platformer, the occasional 3D camera action in Eidos' *Pandemonium* held our interest for a good couple of days, especially when battling others via Bluetooth. Other titles we spent little time with, like *Monkey Ball* (repetitive) and *Puzzle Bobble* (just too damn weird). But overall we're pretty pumped about the games, especially the ones we didn't get our mitts on, including *Splinter Cell*, *Red Faction*, and EA's *FIFA Soccer 2004* and *NCAA Football 2004*. And, 2004 looks even better, with *Ghost Recon*, *Sega Rally*, and *Pathway to Glory* slated to debut.

Zodiac

We don't want to sound like we're wimping out, but it's too early to say how good the games are, most of which cost \$20 to \$30. Most of the titles we tried were not final and Tapwave told us that a couple of partners had not yet been finalized during our demo trial. What we can say about the games we did play (15 are promised at launch) is that they look and feel more advanced than N-Gage's lineup. The question is whether big-name publishers other than Activision will jump onboard.

SIDE BY SIDE

N-Gage

Zodiac

PRICE

\$199

\$299 (32MB)

FEATURES



SCREEN



DESIGN



GAMEPLAY



GAMES



First, the good news: *SpyHunter*, in glorious 3D, plays fast and fun, with great control and weapons aplenty. *Stuntcar Extreme* gives you a good dose of racing action, complete with big ramps, nitro boosts, and rings of fire to jump through on your choice of hot rods. *Interstellar Flames* is a simple but engrossing 3D space shooter. Even *MegaBowling*, which relies on the stylus, is strikingly realistic. The pins echo like in a real alley and the shiny ball reflects the virtual light perfectly.

We didn't get to try some of the premium titles, including the Zodiac version of *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*, the *Mortal Kombat*-esque *Phantom Strike*, *Doom II*, and the real-time-strategy game *Warfare Inc.* Other titles, like *Neverwinter Nights* and *Duke Nukem Mobile*, won't be out until early next year.

All we can say for the moment is that the Zodiac has a lot of potential. If some of the screenshots we've seen match the actual gameplay, there's no reason why more high-profile titles won't soon materialize.

GAMES WINNER

Stay tuned, but for now, this round goes to the N-Gage.

VERDICT

We wish we could take some of N-Gage's game library and combine it with the Zodiac's superior design. Since we can't, we recommend the Zodiac for PDA users looking to upgrade in a big way, and the N-Gage only for gamers who will stick with a title for a few days at a time; otherwise, you'll just toss it—and maybe yourself—out of a moving car in a fit of rage. *S*

OVERALL WINNER

Tapwave
Zodiac



Valve's

The makers of Half-Life 2 spent five years bringing their highly-

“Blue collar” is a term that normally applies to plumbers, construction workers, or anyone sporting a pants sag low enough to show crack. But can a game studio ever be blue collar? We’re talking about highly educated people who, if they lack social graces, usually don’t get more than Cheetos fragments under their fingernails. Yet, if any design outfit can rightly claim to be of the people, the team at Valve Software deserves those populist laurels.



Summer Circle

anticipated sequel to life. But a developer's work is never done.





Taking Lives Without Permission

Gabe Newell's gut feeling after finding out that Valve was the victim of a persistent hacking effort, with the stolen goods being much of the *Half-Life 2* source code? "This sucks."

The attack left the boys at Valve scrambling to track down the intruder, stifle the online swapping of the valuable source code, assess the damage done, and draw up a new blueprint for how to get the highly anticipated game back on track—all amid a swirl of press activity and the expectations of a pre-existing holiday release date.

The projection by Vivendi Universal Games was that the game won't appear on store shelves this holiday. VUG President of International Operations Christophe Ramboz said "A third of the source code was stolen. It's serious because it forces us to delay the launch of the game by at least four months—to April 2004." The leak included code for the game's anti-piracy and network security systems, which means Valve may have to recode the entire multiplayer portion of the game to prevent a rampant amount of cheating.

Now the much-vaunted title joins *Doom III* and *Halo 2* as the things we want now but can't have until later. Thanks a lot, hackers, you guys are sweet.

Success hasn't corrupted Valve, despite the fact that few games have been as successful as *Half-Life*'s eight million units sold. In the five years since that storied first-person action title turned everyone's head, the temptation to play celebrity has not been a factor. True, there was this year's recent move to more attractive offices in downtown Bellevue, Washington. But when *SURGE* paid a visit to Valve in mid-August, it was obvious that the team's collective and consuming passion was for finishing *Half-Life 2* in time for the holidays.

With its amazing physics engine, Valve makes everything behave like it does in real life. Even mutated spiders.

The Game of Games

What made *Half-Life* engaging and novel was the way it unfolded like a good movie: It set an eerie mood and drew you into the life of the up-and-coming young scientist Gordon Freeman, who was working at a high-security government lab when everything went terribly wrong on a secret project. Unfathomable alien creatures scurry forth through an unintended portal, federal agents are attempting to erase everything and everyone at the base in the name of national security, and your only friend

is an orphaned crowbar.

Besides the sheer visceral thrill you got playing *Half-Life*, a deeper look reveals something else: dumb, stupid things weren't happening. The artificial intelligence of in-game opponents was above average. Event scripting didn't get in the way of playing the game. There was skill and intelligence at work under the hood, and it showed. Which brings us back to that blue-collar frame of mind: Valve likes to build it right the first time.

Not surprisingly, the Valve team has been mostly quiet, about *Half-Life 2*—preferring to pound away at the project behind closed doors; the team first showed off playable levels for the first time in May at the Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles. The original release date of September 30 was pushed back to an unspecified holiday date, leaving giddy gamers to simmer with the tidbits of gameplay seen during E3.

A few weeks later, Valve was hacked and the source code was stolen and distributed online. The new release date looks to be the spring of 2004 (*for more information see sidebar Taking Lives Without Permission*). Hit or miss, *Half-Life 2* is a seminal event in computer gaming.


In a far-ranging interview, *SURGE* sat down with three of Valve's pivotal team members: managing director Gabe Newell and senior software development engineers Ken Birdwell and Jay Stelly. While most of the world may consider them *dramatis personae* at the pinnacle of their reach and power, what we learned about these guys and how they have dealt with their success may surprise you.

Fame Is for Rock Stars

When, after 13 years at Microsoft, Newell left along with a group of other like-minded technology staffers to launch Valve in 1996, he now admits, the crew held a naive attitude about what they could pull off. Not that they thought they were being in any way outrageous at

“WE’RE TERRIFIED,” NEWELL ADMITS. “WE HAVE A LOT TO LIVE UP TO...WE’VE SET THE BAR VERY HIGH FOR OURSELVES.”





“PUBLISHERS WOULD TEAR UP OUR PROPOSALS AFTER WE LEFT THE MEETING BECAUSE THEY THOUGHT WE WERE TOO AMBITIOUS.”

the time. Valve was all about a bunch of guys who played games a lot and knew what they wanted.

“When I was working with Gabe at Microsoft, we’d play games all the time, but we saw things that were missing,” Ken Birdwell explains. “We’d see the game that should have been there. So we decided to go where we could with our own concepts to make games we would want to play.”

How did publishers react when Valve first came knocking with concepts that would lead to *Half-Life*? According to Newell, “Publishers would tear up our proposals after we left the meeting because they thought we were too ambitious. In this industry you have the amount of power, or as much clout, as you are worth. Valve definitely has more clout now.”

What was it like when *Half-Life* zoomed to the head of the charts in 1998? Stelly, for one, was shocked and awed—and also pretty psyched.

“I arrived at Valve right when the team was coming together in 1997. We weren’t getting much press back then, so we felt like we really had to prove ourselves. Imagine our reaction when what we had hoped to be a moderately successful game took off.”

Half-Life did take off. All of a sudden, Hollywood came calling. Newell was asked to testify on game design before the Philippine congress, and thousands of reverent gamers were e-mailing their praise and setting up Web sites touting the game. An entire mod community caught fire, extending Valve’s work in unforeseen and very creative directions. Success had found Newell and his compatriots.

“Most of us have a blue-collar mentality,” Newell maintains. “We don’t want to be celebrities, and feel uncomfortable when we’ve been pushed in that direction. I was really embarrassed the first time someone asked for my autograph. I kept thinking, ‘There is no gulf between who you are and who we are; don’t think for a second you couldn’t do this, too.’”

The way Newell sees it, there’s a big difference between a Steven Spielberg type and a Tom Cruise type of fame. With Spielberg, what’s important to fans is who the director is working with, and on what projects. Cruise’s fans want to know who he’s sleeping with. Newell wants Valve to be judged on what they put out there.

Sophomore Slump?

For the last five years, Valve has been working on *Half-Life 2*. Along with celebrity comes huge expectations.

“We’re terrified,” Newell admits. “We have a lot to live up to. There is the fear of a sophomore slump hanging over you. We’ve set the bar very high for ourselves. Now that we’re closer to being done, that pressure is coming off some, but we’ll know better once the game is in people’s hands



and we see how we measure up.”

Stelly says the expectations were seriously amplified in response to the demo of *Half-Life 2* at E3, the first time the game had been shown publicly. “We got great reactions from the industry, but it’s scary to face those high expectations of people who now say *Half-Life 2* will be the best game of all time.”

Birdwell told *SURGE* that not showing the game until it was a few months from completion was vital to keep the project moving in the right direction.

“We made a decision very early on not to talk about *Half-Life 2*. It is so hard to do this level of work with people looking over your shoulder,” Birdwell explains. “I don’t know how the *Duke Nukem Forever* team can do it. [John] Carmack [of *Doom* fame] can do it, but I don’t know how. For us, until the game is done, random comments are not going to help. It’s a hard fight. You want to show your work, but the external pressure is too much, especially when our own internal pressure is high enough.”

But Newell and his crew hardly see themselves as masterful buzz tacticians. When asked what event led the team to keep quiet and smartly escape *Duke Nukem Forever*-style scrutiny, Newell implores they weren’t that smart. “Did we escape? We had those kinds of problems with *Team Fortress 2*. We probably did everyone a disservice by announcing too soon. *Half-Life 2* will be a much better game for our having concentrated on building it—not talking about it.”

Collaboration Is King

Evidence that there was a great deal of work to do in creating *Half-Life 2* can be found in how many additional resources were needed to complete it compared to *Half-Life*. Newell told *SURGE* the short answer was five times as many man-years as *Half-Life*; it’s a remarkable testament considering Valve was building the team and the company during production of *Half-Life*, growing as they

figured out what needed to be done. It took two years to complete *Half-Life*. Despite starting with a full and cohesive team the second time around, *Half-Life 2* has taken five years to complete. Newell suggests the new game may not have been completed at all if not for Valve’s collective structure.

“We were able to build very much on what we did before. I call it the ‘Cabal Process.’ Very collaborative. There’s no notion of an auteur, no single version. Our system only works because of the people here. Although we’ve fine-tuned it a lot since we shipped *Half-Life*, our process still works very well. We shift running the project between team members. Management is something we avoid, not aspire to. Project management is a skill, not a way to be more important or to be paid more,” Newell says.

Birdwell is quick to add that Valve’s Cabal





The Strider has a face you won't forget.

Process amounts to much more than individuals working well together as a group. It may be more time consuming, but the process also guarantees that many team members contribute their skills on the same levels and characters, rather than owning any one element and toiling away in isolation.

"What I am most proud of in *Half-Life 2* are the characters worked on by the most number of people on the team," Birdwell describes. "For instance, right now the gunship has all of these little subtle behavioral characteristics—it's a fully dynamic, fluid, living thing. Different people picked it up and pushed the gunship further. You can only get results like that when more than one person is pulling on their unique skills and making the design better. Now we have something with tons of personality that is so much better than what one person could have done."

To Newell, that kind of in-game dynamism leads to strongly nuanced emotional components within *Half-Life 2* that he is very excited about. "In testing with some women, they responded well to the character stuff that opens the door into the game.

The same for kids. Both groups respond really well to Alyx, this attractive-yet-tough woman. You watch them play and you can see her turning into a person in people's heads. That's a sign that we're moving in the right direction: complex versus trivial player interactions."

For these reasons, Newell is pretty sure *Half-Life 2* is a game anyone can play without having trouble understanding what's going on, regardless of whether they ever played the original. Valve spent a lot of time bringing people in who had never played *Half-Life*. Since the supply of parents, spouses, and other family members was "corrupted" long ago, Newell says the next step was to go out and grab total strangers. "Observing what characters and situations in the game they respond to teaches you a lot, and amazingly ends up translating into an experience skilled gamers better appreciate."

Stelly is proud and thankful that many of the early technology decisions the team made have not changed all that much. "We believed if we pushed in certain tech areas we would be breaking new ground, and it's great to see we didn't make the wrong decisions."

But that doesn't mean everything that was envisioned made it into *Half-Life 2*.

"Almost a year ago we had a hard stop in new technology development," says Newell. "Integration issues were the key thing at that point. Something we called Image Rendered Skybox didn't make the integration milestone. It was all about getting players and characters moving about in arbitrarily complex environments. While making this work was very fun for us, you reach a point where the end product has to be fun for customers, so we had to move on."

Which leads to the question: Is *Half-Life 2* fun to play for the Valve team? The question is greeted with several moments of silence before Newell ventures onto the topic.

"Honestly, we really can't play the game like normal people. You're not having a game experience. You can't help but start making notes about stuff you want to change or fix."

Characters no longer have jerky facial animations. Just ask Alyx.





Half-Life 2 takes place in the European burg City 17.

Past as Inspiration


So what does Newell like to play? He says his early inspirations were Shigeru Miyamoto and Warren Spector. He admires them because he believes they're very humble people who are great at what they do.

"I like anything Blizzard does. They are so consistent, and I can't wait to play *StarCraft Ghost*. I'm also really looking forward to *Pikmin 2*. But, as a gamer, I feel a little bit grumpy at the state of games. Who out there is taking risks? So I look forward to Warren's games like *Deus Ex II*, and to playing id's *Doom III*, but I don't think many people are trying for what could end up being spectacular successes or spectacular failures.

Maybe the last game to skirt that line was *The Sims*. That game was all Will Wright. There should be more games like these. In the long run, it's healthier for our business."

For himself, Newell believes it is a good idea for future Valve projects to move into more complex experiences that can draw more people into games. It's a belief he says he shares with Spector, and a subject that both designers discuss regularly. Within the context of Valve, what comes next is something no one in the team would reveal. Newell came the closest to suggesting what comes next won't stray far from the *Half-Life* mold.

"There is no shortage of things we want to do, stories we want to tell in the *Half-Life* universe. So I'm sure we'll explore in that direction," Newell says. "Some people are looking at other areas, and hopefully we'll have the bandwidth left over to explore new and crazy stuff."

If the exact subject of Valve's post-*Half-Life 2* aspirations remains a bit fuzzy, what is in complete focus is how much Newell craves the work itself. "We spent a lot of time implementing shaders, particles, physics, and only barely scratched the surface. I can't wait to get back into brainstorming mode so we can go back and take more advantage of some of these things." 



Amped 2

The best snowboarding game. Ever

Publisher Microsoft Game Studios | Developer Microsoft Game Studios | Genre Extreme sports | ESRB E | Format Xbox

BREAKDOWN

Graphics		10
Sound		10
Gameplay		9
Story		N/A
Replay Value		10

Back in the day of the original PlayStation, dozens of average snowboarding games flooded the market. Today, there are two legitimate camps—*SSX 3* and *Amped 2*. Microsoft's second snowboarding game successfully merges its realistic environments and licensed boarders with a new trick-based system that takes a page from Activision's *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* franchise. The result? The best snowboarding game ever made.

Amped 2 has everything you could ask for in a game—photo-realistic visuals (available in high definition), a deep career mode, plenty of trick-based freestyle events, twice the mountain ranges of the original, Xbox Live gameplay for up to eight players, a deep create-a-player editor, and over 300 licensed tunes.

Skateboarding fans will fall for the new “butter” combo system, which allows you to link tricks together for amazing moves. There are plenty of photographers and videographers on the slopes to capture these combos and possibly advance your career. If you're not into video (which can be traded via Xbox Live), the game now rewards you for style, so balanced rail slides and controlled rotations earn you more than just applause from other boarders.

Purists will find plenty of virtual courses from around the globe, including Australia and

Switzerland. Each mountain has been mapped by a global positioning system, and snow park architect Chris “Gunny” Gunnarson designed many of the courses. You can step into the boots of pro boarders like Mikey LeBlanc, Janna Meyen, Travis Parker, and Jeremy Jones.

From the moment the chopper drops you at the top of a mountain, you know this game's the closest you'll get to carving up a mountain in the warmth of your living room.

Rounding out the game, which offers endless replay value, is a nice collection of multiplayer modes, including HORSE, King of the Mountain, and Free Ride, which allows you to set up your own challenges as you board down a mountain with seven friends. Buy this snowboard game and you'll be set for quite some time.

—John Gaudiosi





The Rating Game

Each game gets a multitiered review. The first tier is for the meticulous reader who wants a breakdown on the replay value, gameplay, story, sound, and graphics. For these statisticians, we offer a rating from 1 to 10 on each of the categories; you do the math. The second rating simply tells you if you should buy the damn thing.



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Rental



Proceed with caution



Avoid like the plague

Perfect-five games are the rare, console-defining titles that raise the bar for the industry. If you see a game rocking a five, grab your credit card and head to the store. We can't be held responsible for the ridicule you'll face by not playing this game.



The Executioner

Every so often a game that should have been stillborn slithers its way to store shelves, ready to prey upon unsuspecting victims. The Executioner is here to return the game from whence it came.

ESRB Ratings

EC- Early Childhood

You know—unicorns, rainbows, and other things that entertain and educate little rug rats or Japanese teenagers.

E- Everyone

This is a family friendly game with an abundance of wholesome fun. Some parents call these games “babysitters.”

T- Teen

These games have been known to crack one or two skulls along the path to victory.

M- Mature

Hookers, drugs, bloodshed, and sailor talk all rolled into one firebomb of a game. Long live the American Dream.

AO- Adults Only

Reserved for only the raunchiest of titles, think of AO as the XXX of gaming.

RP- Rating Pending

Pretty self explanatory.

Beyond Good & Evil

A platformer on steroids

Publisher **Ubisoft** | Developer **Ubisoft** | Genre **Action** | ESRB **T** | Format **GC, PC, PS2, Xbox**

Nevermind that *Rayman* creator Michel Ancel's latest title is so pretentious you could spot its French origins a mile away, *Beyond Good & Evil* isn't one to miss. *BG&E* is more artistic vision than ass-kickin' action-adventure. By skillfully blending multiple gameplay styles into one cohesive whole, the product succeeds where many have failed—it's both beautiful and damned entertaining.

Jade, our heroine, has found herself trapped in an unfolding battle for the fate of Hyllis, an

otherwise peaceful planet, when the DomZ invade. Part photographer, part kung fu junkie, Jade wields a mean Dai-jo staff to fend off the enemy, while snapping some Pulitzer Prize-winning photos during her quest. When teamed with Pey'j, a half-man/half-pig who doubles as her uncle (don't ask), the girl can solve some instantly accessible, but reflex-intensive, two-person puzzles.

BREAKDOWN

Graphics		9
Sound		9
Gameplay		9
Story		9
Replay Value		7





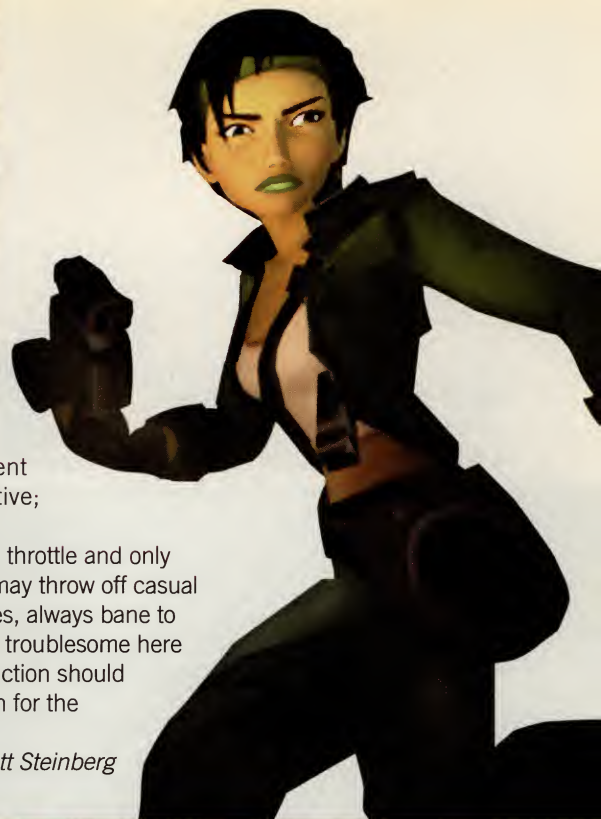
Think the setup's strange? Wait until you take command of a hovercraft and battle snake-like sea serpents, explore abandoned mines, and confront insect-like bosses bent on eating the heroine alive. Boasting numerous quest sequences, a dizzying host of colorful supporting characters, and even jet boot-powered jumps, the game handles like a platformer on steroids; every play element is so brilliantly polished, you'll be floored.

The presentation scores equally high marks. The dynamic orchestral soundtrack that rises during appropriately intense moments complements the cinematic slow-motion

combat sequences. Character and environment designs aren't just inventive; they're out of this world.

The journey starts at full throttle and only quickens its pace, which may throw off casual gamers. The camera angles, always bane to third-person games, prove troublesome here as well, but the addictive action should keep you tied to the screen for the duration of the game.

—Scott Steinberg



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- Tech Edge Aug 2003

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horse-power for graphics-guzzling games. ”**

- PCupgrade Magazine Oct 2003



artificial intelligence



Call of Duty

Live the life of a grunt

Publisher Activision | Developer Infinity Ward | Genre FPS | ESRB T | Format PC

BREAKDOWN

Graphics	██████████	9
Sound	██████████	10
Gameplay	██████████	9
Story	██████████	8
Replay Value	██████████	8

In most World War II first-person shooters, you take the role of a supersoldier who singlehandedly undermines the Nazi war plans and swings the tide of the war. Yet, without the sacrifice and bravery of the common soldier, the war would have turned out much different. Enter *Call of Duty*.

As you make your way to Berlin, you'll get a great perspective of the battles that shaped WWII by jumping between American, British, and Russian forces during various moments of the war. Much of your success relies upon the men fighting around you, and developer Infinity Ward spent a lot of time sharpening the A.I. of your fellow soldiers. No longer do they run into open meadows with guns blazing; instead they stick to cover while moving through the battlefield. On more than one occasion a fellow soldier saved our ass by taking out an enemy we didn't see.

The game's strongest moments come during the big battles. Rarely will you enter a city without

bullets coming from all angles, and the shell shock from the dropping bombs is as disorienting to you as it is painful for your character. With an enhanced *Quake III* engine, the game can display up to 300 well-defined soldiers on the screen at once, which greatly conveys the scope of these battles. All of this adds up to one of the most intense and cinematic war games of all time. Only when *Call of Duty* regresses into *Medal of Honor*-style covert missions, in which two soldiers take on a ship of Germans, does the game lose momentum, but these are short missions that don't take away from the game's overall pleasure.

Our only other complaint was with the brevity of the single-player campaign—it scarcely took more than two extended afternoon sittings to complete the game. This is tempered by the inclusion of some solid multiplayer levels. In the end, *Call of Duty* raises the bar for what makes a good war shooter, and definitely leaves us salivating for Infinity Ward's next project.

—Matt Bertz

Fatal Frame 2: Crimson Butterfly

Camera vs. ghost part two

Publisher Tecmo | Developer Tecmo | Genre Survival Horror | ESRB RP | Format PS2

BREAKDOWN

Graphics	██████████	8
Sound	██████████	9
Gameplay	██████████	7
Story	██████████	8
Replay Value	██████████	7



Horror movies might be a popular scare in theaters, but it takes a lot of work to bring that kind of suspense to a game, with only a few titles capturing the suspense of thrill-laden Japanese import films like *Ringu*. The *Silent Hill* series has been successful by using a combination of fog and strange creatures to raise the hairs on the back of your neck, while the original *Fatal Frame* brought an interesting element in to raise the creep factor—ghosts and cameras.

The original game, which featured a woman looking for her missing brother, was so successful that Dreamworks picked up a film option on the title, which begins production in 2004.

Crimson Butterfly doesn't pick up where the last game left off; it is the story of twin sisters who, while traveling to a village they once knew, uncover an abandoned village that was once the site of a ritual killing involving a set of twins. Haunted by ghosts, the village will bring the twins face-to-face with the darker sides of their existence.

The sisters, Mio and Mayu, combat the ghosts with a heightened sixth sense and a camera combat system—so much for a 12-gauge shotgun. A picture says a thousand words, and now it can capture the spirit of ghosts, too. Exploring the forsaken village will have you at the edge of your couch.

—Enid Burns



FIFA 2004

Retooled to make a run

Publisher EA Sports | Developer EA Canada | Genre Sports | ESRB E | Format GBA, GC, PC, PS2, Xbox

BREAKDOWN

Graphics		8
Sound		6
Gameplay		9
Story		N/A
Replay Value		9



The *FIFA* series is to American soccer fans what the *Madden* series is to NFL fanatics. Faltering behind the success of Konami's *Winning Eleven* soccer series in Japan and *Pro Evolution Soccer* in Europe, EA Sports has completely retooled this year to stay in contention as a premier soccer title.

EA took offense to its worldwide franchise's sub par performance in the same way they trashed their *Triple Play* baseball franchise and replaced it with the successful *MVP Baseball*. The same positive turnaround is seen in the fantastic *FIFA 2004*.

To make the game look better and act more lifelike, EA Canada developed a new organic animation engine. Instead of using a number of stock animations, each player on the pitch has his own animation.

Avid *FIFA* fans will notice that the ball physics have been completely reworked, and as a result you will have to concentrate on dribbling and positioning the ball much more. No more passes through three or four oncoming defenders or charging through the line with a simple speed burst. These guys are physical.

The biggest improvement in this year's game is off-the-ball control. Anyone who has played or watched soccer seriously knows that what the players without the ball are doing is just as important as the one with it. Each of the players without the ball is in better position for passes and assists: They play more like a team.

The many changes that EA has made to *FIFA* will entice gamers to give the series a well-deserved second look.

— Todd Mowatt



Harry Potter: Quidditch World Cup

Malfoy's looking for a beatdown

Publisher EA Games | Developer EA Games | Genre Sports | ESRB E | Format GBA, GC, PC, PS2, Xbox

A year in Hogwarts School of Witchcraft wouldn't be the same without the Quidditch competition between the houses. Now it is possible to get on that broomstick and play the fast-paced and aggressive game from the comfort of your own console.

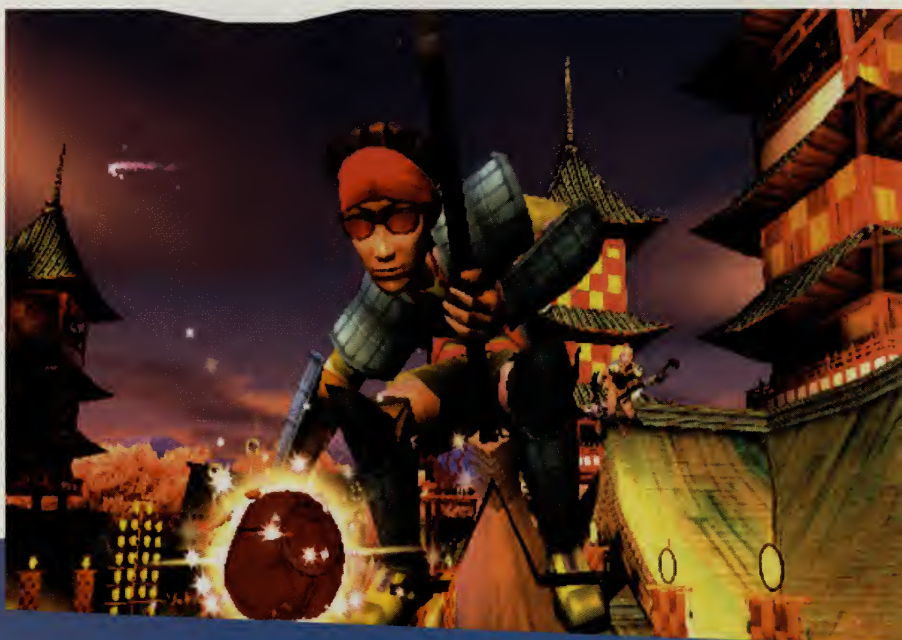
While Electronic Arts' previous two *Harry Potter* titles have included some broomstick flying, and even Quidditch matches, the sequences were as awkward to play as the rest of the game, with simple controls and lackluster graphics. *Quidditch World Cup* is a standalone game, and plays more like the company's *Madden NFL* franchise than a kid's game. Players will toggle between players to chase the Quaffle, beat the Bludgers and, yes, seek the Golden Snitch. While the action is easy to get into, any Potter fan with previous sports gaming experience will have a clear advantage.

You can play at the collegiate level against the Hogwarts houses and other schools, or take your game to the professional circuit to compete for the World Cup, as the title would suggest. Harry will go up against his nemesis Malfoy and his adversary Victor Krum.

Playing *World Cup* should keep the school spirit up through mid-next year when the third film, and EA's companion game, *Prisoner of Azkaban* should hit theaters and store shelves.

— Enid Burns

BREAKDOWN		
Graphics		8
Sound		7
Gameplay		8
Story		N/A
Replay Value		9



kill.switch

Tactical shooter reporting for duty

Publisher Namco | Developer Namco | Genre Action | ESRB M | Format PC, PS2, Xbox

Wholesale slaughter—now there's a great concept for a videogame. Like long-lost classic *Cabal* before it, newcomer *kill.switch* introduces audiences to the wonderful world of tactical combat. Crouching behind objects, fending off entire enemy battalions with machine guns, lifting an arm out from behind a crate and randomly firing into oncoming forces without risking one's neck... that's just a few of the many delights in store.

From desert wastelands to collapsing oil rigs, you'll be mowing down troops in a methodical fashion. In essence, the player must slip between the sparse cover dotting each terrain segment, pausing only to clear the immediate area of hostiles, and then move forward into the next waiting deathtrap. It's an unsophisticated conceptual platform, we admit, but one that works surprisingly well, thanks to splendid level construction.



BREAKDOWN

Graphics		8
Sound		8
Gameplay		8
Story		7
Replay Value		6

Whether planting explosive charges or quietly sniping sentries, tension levels never abate. The atmospheric touches (explosions can leave armchair operatives blind, deaf, and reeling) and shockingly intelligent adversaries will keep your eyes open for the majority of the mission. Go on, play the sucker multiple times, we dare you... see if troops ever charge, flank, or countermand your current position in the same way twice.

Unfortunately, as anyone who memorizes stage patterns will discover, there's a method to the madness. The strong gameplay and correspondingly superb audio-visual package are ultimately let down by the title's limited scope. Long-term replay value suffers accordingly, but immediate gratification is assured.

Despite such flaws, consider coughing up the cash for this game anyway. Like *Desert Eagle*, *kill.switch* may not be the sharpest piece of software on the market, but it does offer considerable bang for the buck.

—Scott Steinberg



Legacy Of Kain: Defiance

Who can resist feasting on blood and souls?

Publisher Eidos Interactive | Developer Crystal Dynamics | Genre Action | ESRB RP | Format PC, PS2, Xbox

BREAKDOWN

Graphics		8
Sound		7
Gameplay		8
Story		8
Replay Value		6



While the big kids at Eidos are busy with high-profile jams like *Deus Ex 2* and *Thief 3*, in the back room at Crystal Dynamics, the *Blood Omen* and *Soul Reaver* franchises are preparing for a powerful reunion.

Defiance doubles your vampiric pleasure by presenting two anti-heroes as playable characters. The complex story jumps between timelines from chapter to chapter, trading off the bloodthirsty Kain for his soul-sucking antagonist, Raziel. And while the tale of blood feuds and immortal grudges is fun, we're here for the action.

Combat has been given a transfusion; now standard sword attacks, telekinetic powers, and a great air-juggle move that leaves enemies cleft in two are your main action abilities. Throwing foes against walls and into space with the power of your mind is also a lot of fun, while the ability to hit multiple targets at once opens up the range of battle.

As always, Raziel and Kain replenish their energy by sucking souls or blood, respectively, and the acts of feeding are balanced to take enough time that strategic feeding is necessary.

The graphics are a treat, with impressively gothic environments shown off by a camera system that zooms in and out as necessary. The fire effects are particularly nice, especially when applied to an enemy you've just thrown into a brazier. The lithe, wiry Raziel looks slightly better than Kain's vampire on steroids, but both are excellent animations.

The sound doesn't quite measure up to the visual presentation—while the sucking and rending sounds are good, many incidental effects feel standard, and detract from the overall package. That's a small complaint from a game that returns to the high standard set many years ago by *Soul Reaver*. Fans won't be disappointed with this blood feast.

—Russ Fincher



Lord of the Rings: Return of the King

Because you can't get enough Tolkien

Publisher EA Games | Developer EA, Hypnos Entertainment | Genre Action | ESRB T | Format GBA, GC, PC, PS2, Xbox

How long does it take to return a ring, already? Obviously the one ring of power requires a bit more effort than your standard trip to the mall, which is a good thing for fans of the epic J.R.R. Tolkien fantasy series (not to mention Peter Jackson's stunning cinematic versions).

Building on last year's smash hit, *The Two Towers*, Electronic Arts continues the battle for Middle Earth, which reaches its climatic conclusion with this third-person action game. Expect more of the same fast-paced and action-focused gameplay as you battle everything that the forces of evil can throw at you.

You'll get to play as Sam and Frodo as they enter the dark lands of Mordor and begin the most important chapter of this saga. Don't expect things to be very easy, not when you'll have to battle the monstrous giant spider Shelob and engage with the Witch King before a final showdown with

Sauron himself.

You can also experience this wondrous tale as Gandalf, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli—as well as two secret, unlockable characters. To keep the vision of the game close to the Jackson films, the actual actors have voiced each character.

Best of all, *The Return of the King* features a co-op multiplayer mode, so you can form your very own fellowship and head to 12 richly created environments, including the Paths of the Dead, the city of Minas Tirith, and the infamous Crack of Doom. With all its epic gameplay, your only concern may be taking time out to actually see the movie.

— Peter Suci

BREAKDOWN

Graphics	//////	8
Sound	//////	8
Gameplay	//////	9
Story	//////	9
Replay Value	//////	7



More karts, mushrooms






Kart fans rejoice: *Mario Kart: Double Dash!!* is so good it should revitalize sales of the GameCube and power slide its way into the hearts and minds of Nintendo fans everywhere.

Aside from using items to knock other drivers off course and vice versa, the gameplay has a few other dynamic twists to keep the races furious, like racing on the deck of a cruise liner or a hazardous mountainside riddled with narrow roadways and deep chasms.

The controls are simple: There's one button for gas and one for brake, but don't let such a simple control scheme fool you into thinking that this game won't keep you and your friends on the edge of your seat. This game is extremely addictive.

The biggest difference between *Double Dash!!* and other Mario Kart adventures is the cockpit composition—you now have two characters in your kart instead of one. One drives, while the other takes care of the items and helps deliver power slides around corners. This allows for amazing 16-player battles with a four GameCube LAN setup! If only there was online play...

Some of the newer items in *Double Dash!!* include the hard-to-find blue koopa shells that seek out the leader of the race and send them flying into the ditch. The lightning bolts that make the other

BREAKDOWN		
Graphics		9
Sound		6
Gameplay		10
Story		6
Replay Value		9



racers smaller and less mobile are back too, so the multiplayer battles should be just as fun as in the previous versions.

Mario Kart: Double Dash!! is an excellent multiplayer title that actually warrants double exclamation points.

— Todd Mowatt



Medal of Honor: Rising Sun

The other World War II

Publisher EA Games | Developer EA LA | Genre FPS | ESRB T | Format GC, PS2, Xbox

After the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese Admiral in charge of the operation reportedly said, "I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve." Through ten massive levels, in *Rising Sun* you are a part of that giant as you storm across the Japanese-held Pacific.

From fighting to survive at Pearl Harbor to securing the jungle island of Guadalcanal, you'll partake in the frontline action as a United States Marine filled with great resolve. The major missions are balanced with secret missions like the rescuing of POWs in the occupied Philippines or the destruction of the infamous bridge over the River Kwai.

This latest *Medal of Honor* title has addressed the somewhat linear nature of the series by opening up the gameplay and offering multiple paths to victory. The enemy AI has been greatly improved, and you can expect more squad-based

action, both with your own troops and those of the adversaries.

Developer EA LA completely reworked the graphics engine to give everything that authentic feel that fans of the series have come to expect.

This wouldn't be a true *Medal of Honor* title without the non-stop multiplayer mode, and *Rising Sun* features ten multiplayer levels with up to four players in Deathmatch and Team modes. You can also use the all-new co-op mode, so you and a friend can ship out to the Pacific and clean up the theater of war.

— Peter Suci

BREAKDOWN

Graphics		9
Sound		9
Gameplay		8
Story		9
Replay Value		9



Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time

The prince awakens to find he still kicks ass

Publisher Ubisoft | Developer Ubisoft Montreal | Genre Action/Adventure | ESRB T | Format GBA, GC, PC, PS2, Xbox

BREAKDOWN

Graphics	██████████	8
Sound	██████████	8
Gameplay	██████████	8
Story	██████████	10
Replay Value	██████████	8



When the first *Prince of Persia* game hit in 1989, it was a wild departure from the standard run-and-jump platformer. It featured a gymnastic protagonist who leapt off ledges, fought swordsmen in fierce battles, and avoided booby traps, such as spikes springing out of the floor and dart guns in the walls.

A couple of game generations later and armed with the latest technology, *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* takes the original premise and creates a wildly cinematic challenge. The original prince is again our hero, and he's bent on redemption after being tricked into releasing the Sands of Time, which turned the Persian Empire into a flock of ferocious demons.

The prince has aged quite well, with layers of acrobatic moves at his disposal. It's especially cool

to see him running from platform to platform by scurrying across the wall between them, springing between pillars with Cirque du Soleil-like flair, or doing Olympic-style swings from poles to avoid some bad guys.

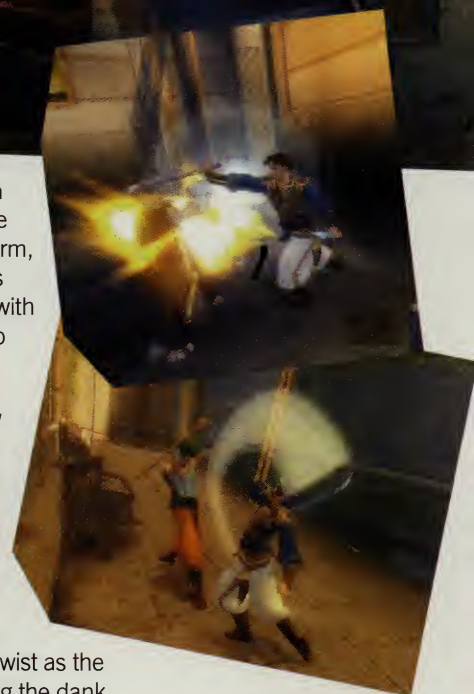
Initially armed with a

quality sword, the prince stumbles upon a special dagger that enables him to change the course of time. If he falls from a platform, a button push "rewinds" him to before his fatal plummet. If he's having a hard time with a series of enemies, he can fast forward to better dispatch them.

It's no surprise that the same studio (Ubisoft Montreal) that made *Splinter Cell* created this amazing title. Both games feature advanced graphics and animation of the characters and their surroundings. The prince's flowing movements—such as vaulting over enemies in mid-combat—are mesmerizing. There are also drapes and banners hanging from the walls and in doorways that wave and twist as the prince runs by. These stylish touches bring the dank Persian world alive.

As our dashing prince has evolved from 2D to 3D, the story has become more cinematic and his adventures offer more in-depth gameplay—though some sequences will frustrate even the most experienced player. It's a challenge that many gamers will surely want to take on.

—Andy Eddy



Project Gotham Racing 2

Still no Batman, but the racing is good

Publisher Microsoft Game Studios | Developer Bizarre Creations | Genre Racing | ESRB E |

Project Gotham Racing was one of the hottest debut Xbox titles, offering gorgeous cars, elaborate courses, and demanding competition. However, most agreed that the game would have been that much better with multiplayer races over the Internet. Now that Xbox Live is in full gear, this sequel has the green light to fulfill our wishes.

PGR2 features extensive use of Xbox Live for multiplayer action with up to eight simultaneous jockeys in a race, and rankings. Even the single-player segments benefit from the online connection, as you can download a "ghost" performance from one of the top *PGR2* racers to test your skills against the best, even if they don't want to race you head on. It's also a great way to see the lines and tactics used by the drivers who've logged the best results.

The game builds extensively on the Kudos system used in the first game, so players can earn points to unlock better cars—and over 100 brand-name vehicles are available. Though most racing games simply reward good driving and low times, the Kudos are also awarded for bold moves, such as sliding around a turn, taking the tightest line, and even putting the car on two wheels. With myriad tracks offered from cities around the world (such as Hong Kong, Sydney, and Chicago), and a ton of gameplay modes (timing runs, speed camera trials, and street races), there are plenty

of chances to learn where the best point-gathering opportunities are on each circuit.

Through it all, the beautiful graphics once again prove to be the solid foundation for the game. When you're trying to milk an extra tenth of a second out of a course or master the power slide through a cone course, you may catch yourself staring too long at the passing scenery.

—Andy Eddy

BREAKDOWN

Graphics	██████████	9
Sound	██████████	8
Gameplay	██████████	8
Story		N/A
Replay Value	██████████	9



Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando

Bigger, badder, better

Publisher SCEA | Developer Insomniac Games | Genre Action/Adventure | ESRB T | Format PS2

Last fall, the challenging and humorous action/adventure title *Ratchet & Clank* was a surprise on the PS2 scene. The animated outer-space duo—a wide-eyed rabbit-like alien creature and his diminutive robot helper—took on countless baddies with a strange assortment of weapons and gadgets.

In less than a year's time—short by industry standards—developer Insomniac Games has crafted a sequel, and it shines in the same manner as the original. It's stacked with tough platform action, puzzles, adversaries, and wild gear, but the game has grown in a number of ways to make it even more durable.

For instance, Insomniac claims that some of *Going Commando*'s levels are 150 percent bigger than their first-game counterparts, which means there's lots of room to explore. The new title also sports “mega-games,” which are structured like mini-games, but with extended



gameplay. These include first-person space combat, a TV show battle arena, and wild “spherical worlds”—an interesting playfield to say the least.

Once again, Ratchet & Clank's quest is seasoned with comedy, from the



characters (including a gibberish-spouting corporate executive and the cute-but-vicious ProtoPet) to the numerous videos that fill the story.

Insomniac also made sure that you couldn't get through the game with only basic weapons, so

it upped the opposition count and made them progressively tougher. To keep the title pair on par, they can “level up” like in an RPG, which adds hit points to their damage bar and increases their combat skill. Rest assured, it's a platform game, but the evolution of the heroes is a good addition.

There are more weapons, which, interestingly enough, can also be “leveled.” When each device has been used a certain amount, it morphs into a more powerful variant. Expect a weird assortment of weaponry, including the Sheepinator (and its variation, the Black Sheepinator). Trying the different settings for each weapon is a blast in itself.

Going Commando is a solid follow-up to what was a solid debut. We can hardly wait to see what Insomniac comes up with next.

—Andy Eddy

BREAKDOWN

Graphics	////	7
Sound	////	9
Gameplay	////	8
Story	////	9
Replay Value	////	9

SOCOM II: U.S. Navy SEALs

Tango till they're sore

Publisher SCEA | Developer Zipper Interactive | Genre Action | ESRB M | Format PS2

There's a good reason why Sony currently has the largest online console gaming community in the U.S.—*SOCOM*. With the contemporary political climate that puts every one of us in the shadow of possible terrorism, gamers can now fight back, at least virtually. Armed to the hilt with the latest weapons and technology, you get to take out the bad guys around the globe with the help of your online squad mates. This much-anticipated sequel lives up to the high standards set by the original, while pushing the graphics even further and introducing plenty of new features.

This time around, the first-person action includes new mission types, like escort and breach, which expand beyond the demolition, suppression, and extraction objectives introduced last year. Globetrotting is part of the job, and levels span the world with terror hotbeds like Algeria, Albania, Brazil, and Russia.

While there's a solid 12-level single-player experience included, the heart of *SOCOM II* is 16-player online combat (eight players per side). That said, Sony's upped the AI in the single-player game, as enemies know where to hide and can

track the slightest noise from your squad. Your squad AI was a weak spot in the first game, and though it's been slightly improved, sometimes it still

feels like you're warring with paintball warriors instead of trained professionals.

The diversity in the urban and rural settings really stands out in the dozen new online maps (the original's 10 maps are also included, with new surprises). Many environments include vehicles like tanks and helicopters that you'll have to contend with. Of course, there are 15 new weapons at your disposal, including some with a cool nightvision interface.

Like *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six*, *SOCOM* has always been about realistic military fighting. While not as graphically rich as its competition, *SOCOM II* holds its own and stands out as the leading online combat game for PS2.

—John Gaudiosi

BREAKDOWN

Graphics	██████████	9
Sound	██████████	8
Gameplay	██████████	9
Story	██████████	9
Replay Value	██████████	10



SURGE

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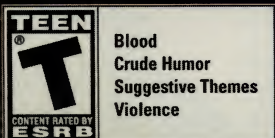


"An online western shooter that would do Clint Eastwood proud."

— IGN Xbox

"From the saloons to the stunning horseback gameplay, Dead Man's Hand looks and smells as bad-ass as you can possibly imagine."

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DEAD MAN'S HAND



Top Spin

Finally, a tournament Anna can win

Publisher Microsoft | Developer Power & Magic | Genre Sports | ESRB E | Format Xbox

Microsoft has served up a winner with *Top Spin* for the Xbox. This game has an incredible look and an arcade feel that surpasses the intensity of both Sega's *Virtua Tennis* and Nintendo's *Mario Tennis*, which is no small feat.

As with every tennis game, in *Top Spin* you can serve up aces, add topspin to your shots, slice, or hit lobs and drop shots to catch opponents off guard. The game isn't all about being a big-time tennis simulation, though, as you can hit trick shots between your legs, behind your back, or over your head.

We had a blast taking part in singles matches, doubles matches, tournaments, and moving up the tour ladder. If you make a great shot or a win a tiebreaker, you can react with enthusiasm. It's not just for showing off; if you get the crowd behind you, the emotional energy can be translated into momentum you can use to your advantage.

You'll be instantly impressed by the attention to detail Power & Magic paid to this title, not just by adding some of the world's top tennis players (such as Lleyton Hewitt), but some of the sexiest as well (Anna Kournikova, care for a match?). The developer also added player shot patterns,

mannerisms, and on-court behaviors. It would be nice to see a tennis game with all the major players instead of a select few, but it doesn't look like it's going to happen any time soon.

The biggest problem has to do with AI-controlled players being out of position. The majority of the time they play the entire game half way between the net and the baseline, which is known as no-man's land to tennis instructors. This is one sacrifice you have to live with to keep the arcade feel of the game intact.

Top Spin serves up a tough game and is quite possibly the best console tennis title ever made.

— Todd Mowatt

BREAKDOWN

Graphics		9
Sound		8
Gameplay		10
Story		N/A
Replay Value		10



Castlevania: Lament of Innocence

Bemount's Dante impersonation

Publisher Konami | Developer KCE Tokyo | Genre Action | ESRB M | Format PS2

The *Castlevania* franchise, which many hardcore gamers consider the pinnacle of 2D game design, has shamelessly flirted with the third dimension in the past; a flawed Nintendo 64 cartridge here, a cancelled Dreamcast title there. With *Lament of Innocence*, however, Konami has firmly committed the series to 3D—and the result is mediocre at best. Why can't Konami deliver the gameplay depth on the PlayStation 2 that it already has with three critical and commercial hits for the humble Game Boy Advance?

Lament's biggest flaw is its heavy emphasis on combat and near-omission of the exploratory, role-playing, and platform-jumping elements that have become hallmarks of the series. The considerable majority of the action consists of marching through a series of sparsely decorated rooms and whipping the monsters within until they blow up and die. Woo hoo.

You learn additional attacks and combos as you proceed, and you get to play with a healthy



BREAKDOWN

Graphics	////	6
Sound	////////	9
Gameplay	////	6
Story	////	5
Replay Value	////	6



selection of secondary sub-weapons and magical spells, but the combat used to be a means to an end; now it's the core of the game. This infatuation with combos has gotten out of hand—*Devil May Cry*, we're looking in your direction.

Lament feels good, although low-polygon environments and characters hamper the visuals; while the reduced detail keeps the game speed humming, surely the programmers could've managed more detail than this. As for the musical score, composer Michiru Yamane should build a new room onto her house to hold all the awards she's going to win for her amazing work here; she effortlessly ranges from sweeping orchestral themes to bass-thumping techno while maintaining a consistent, foreboding mood.

Castlevania: Lament of Innocence is an incredible tease; it delivers all of the secondary elements—heart containers, monster encyclopedia, et al—but none of the primary elements that have elevated the series into greatness. This is a solid whip-'em-up, but it could have been much more.

—Zach Meston



Counter Strike: Condition Zero

Gunning for success

Publisher Sierra | Developer Valve, Ritual | Genre FPS | ESRB M | Format PC

BREAKDOWN

Graphics		8
Sound		7
Gameplay		7
Story		6
Replay Value		9



Beginning as a mod for *Half-Life*, this little terrorist vs. counter-terrorist game has grown into something quite amazing. But even with user-created bots thrown in for thrills, the first version lacked any satisfying single player mode, and unlike with the superior *Rainbow Six* series, someone usually got stuck playing the terrorists.

This full-blown sequel not only greatly enhances the AI's bots, which are as cunning and skilled as ever, but you can finally take part in an actual campaign. Complete with 20 missions, you won't be limited to storming yet another warehouse; the environments are much more diverse than the old mods, from jungles to crowded urban streets. As a special forces operative you can rescue hostages, escort VIPs, and even take care of some bomb disposal, but the best part is taking down the bad guys and sending them to "paradise."

The multiplayer action has been improved with greatly improved visuals like atmospheric weather effects, more detailed renderings for individual characters, and plenty of dynamic visual special effects. While the multiplayer action has been surpassed by the likes of *Battlefield 1942* and *Halo* for the PC, *Counter-Strike* is a good team-based game that has gotten a whole lot better.

— Peter Suci



Final Fantasy X-2

Yuna pulls a Brittany Spears

Publisher Square Enix | Developer Square Enix | Genre RPG | ESRB T | Format PS2

Square Enix's *Final Fantasy X-2* might be slick and sexy, but it takes the series in a new direction that some diehard FF fans may not be able to stomach.

When *FF X-2* was released in Japan, the title sold 1.2 million copies on the first day, and an additional 600,000 copies in the next week. These are monster numbers. But those sales figures were for a place where *Mr. Mosquito*, a game about trying to land a mosquito and suck blood out of family members for points, sold 400,000 copies. These numbers need to be taken with a grain of salt.

For the first time in the history of the *Final Fantasy* series, there is a true sequel. *FF X-2* is the follow-up to the amazing *FF X*, and the game begins two years after Yuna, Tidus, and company kicked Sin out of Spira. The story centers on a *Spice Girls-meets-Charlie's Angels* plotline that comes closer to taking it off than it does taking off. The game starts in a blitzball stadium where



Yuna is on stage doing her best Britney Spears impersonation.

When the concert finishes, Rikku, Yuna, and their new friend Paine are confronted by an enemy, but before they fight it out, they engage in a pageant-like pose. Oookaay. In terms of the gameplay, the missions are non-linear and can be tackled in any order.

Instead of navigating the sphere grid to develop your characters, Square Enix has put together a new job class system. During play, and even during combat, players can switch classes using the new Garment Grid. In a split second Yuna can attack as a Songstress and perform a spell, and then change her outfit and attack as a Berserker. You'd think it was one long music video.

The battle system is rock solid, although the overall quest is pretty wacky. This game feels nothing like the previous *Final Fantasy* games, and this time that's not a good thing. From the looks of *FF X-2*, Square Enix is trying too hard to entertain the Pepsi Generation, and is doing less and less for the diehard role-playing gamer.

—Todd Mowatt

BREAKDOWN

Graphics	██████████	9
Sound	██████████	8
Gameplay	██████████	7
Story	██████████	6
Replay Value	██████████	6





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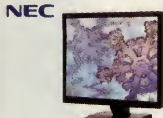
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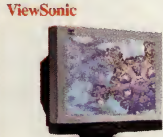
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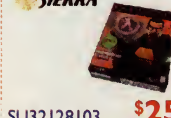
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Goblin Commander: Unleash the Horde

RTS on a console? Not bloody likely

Publisher Jaleco | Developer Jaleco | Genre RTS | ESRB T | Format GC, PS2, Xbox



You may not know their names, but Ron and Chris Millar have been behind some of the best-selling real-time strategy (RTS) games in history during their stint at Blizzard. From *Starcraft*, *Warcraft*, and *Diablo*, the Millars learned a thing or two about how to create a blockbuster title. With no keyboard or mouse, controls have been the sticking point for

past console RTS games. The Millars, however, have made their controls intuitive with this game, which was designed from the ground up for consoles.

As the name implies, *Goblin Commander* puts you in charge of a clan of goblins in the land of Ogriss. Gameplay starts simple enough, with you controlling the Stonecrushers clan, which consists of miners, rock throwers, luggers, pit bosses, and drummers. The plug-and-play strategy allows you to choose your ten troop members and set out for combat in a matter of minutes.

As you progress through the subterranean caves, lush woodlands, and towering castles,

you'll be able to commandeer additional clans, including Hellfire, Stormbringer, Plaguespitter, and Nighthorde. Each clan has five distinct warrior types with three levels of power (weapons, armor, and healing) and unique attacks. For good measure, you'll also be able to control one hulking Titan with each clan. These massive creatures die young, but leave plenty of destruction in their wake. As an added bonus, these monsters eat anything in sight to extend their short lifespans.

While RTS games continue to thrive in the form of big franchises on PC (*Age of Mythology*, *Command & Conquer*), *Goblins* introduces a simplified variation to a much wider audience. While there's plenty of depth and strategy involved in the title, newbies can sit down and lose themselves in the hack-and-slash elements; just guiding the Titan around the screen gobbling up enemies is a game unto itself.

The 24 diverse levels offer plenty of enemies to fight, buildings to destroy, and forests to flatten. Two-player split-screen mode adds to the replay value, although it's not as fun as true online gameplay. Overall, *Goblin Commanders* isn't a bad game, but the RTS genre feels lost on the console.

—John Gaudiosi

BREAKDOWN

Graphics		7
Sound		7
Gameplay		8
Story		8
Replay Value		7



I-Ninja

Ninjas and robots. 'Nuff said

Publisher Namco | Developer Argonaut Games | Genre Action | ESRB RP | Format GC, PS2, Xbox

I-Ninja is the story of a little guy with a big dream. Though he's trained with the best, his size keeps him from getting the recognition he craves. So, while off fighting the evil master O-Dor and his powerful army of Ranx, I-Ninja must pick up pieces to assemble his giant robot to fight the biggest baddies in the world.

Using his mastery of the arts, the little one has an arsenal of weapons, including shurikens, swords, blowguns, rocket launchers, and guided missiles. He can also use tools to help him get around, like flying with his "sword copter." He traverses through this platform world by shredding on rails and using manga-style ninja moves against a countless army of obstacles.

The game feels like platformers that have come before, but *I-Ninja* combines campy kung-fu

cinema action, manga-style action, the fun of a Saturday morning cartoon, and mech robot action—quite the recipe for success.

—Enid Burns

BREAKDOWN

Graphics	██████████	8
Sound	██████████	7
Gameplay	██████████	9
Story	██████████	9
Replay Value	██████████	7



Karaoke Revolution

No talent required

Publisher Konami | Developer Harmonix Music Systems | Genre Music Puzzle | ESRB E | Format PS2

Konami is always trying new things, such as *Boktai*, a Game Boy Advance title that requires the use of the sun's rays to aid the gameplay, and its *Dance Dance Revolution* (DDR) series of "rhythm" games. Now, Konami has teamed with Harmonix (of *Amplitude* fame) in betting that a segment of gamers will engage in a karaoke contest by strapping on a PS2 headset and matching notes for points and combos.

range, the software will automatically detect your shift to a higher or lower octave and will still track your note accuracy. However, it would have been more flexible to provide an "offset"—similar to actual karaoke setups—where the singer can change the key of any song to a more comfortable range.

While singing karaoke in a bar, a performance often benefits from subtle nuances or riffs on the original song, but with *Karaoke Revolution*'s rigid tracking, you'll lose points if you stray from the note bars with any frills or variations, no matter how great they sound.

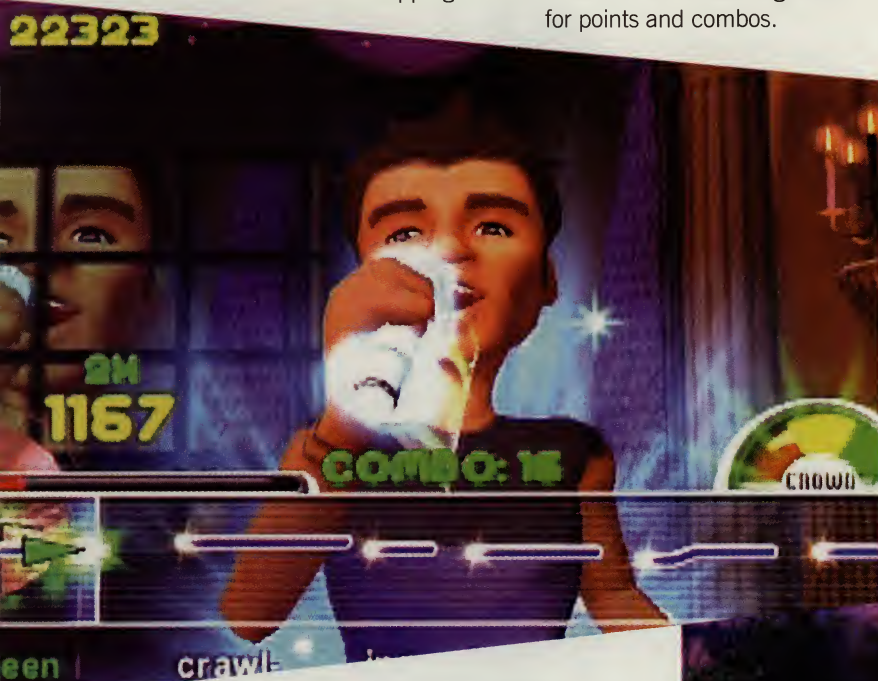
Konami did a decent job of merging karaoke into a solid game framework, and it'll be even better when the promised expansion discs are released (a menu option is already in place), enabling players of all ages to find a disc that matches their musical tastes. Our money's on Right Said Fred.

Minor quirks aside, *Karaoke Revolution* is a sharp concept that doesn't fall flat.

—Andy Eddy

BREAKDOWN

Graphics	██████████	8
Sound	██████████	9
Gameplay	██████████	7
Story		N/A
Replay Value	██████████	8



Using innovative technology, the headset tracks the player's pitch in relation to the music. Successful crooning, similar to DDR's fancy footwork, unlocks new performance venues and alternate outfits for the onscreen singers. More than 30 tunes from the last few decades are featured, including Michael Jackson's *Billie Jean*, Avril Lavigne's *Complicated*, Norah Jones' *Don't Know Why*, and R.E.M.'s *It's the End of the World as We Know It*.

If a song is out of your



Need for Speed: Underground

Faster and fierouser

Publisher Electronic Arts | Developer Electronic Arts | Genre Racing | ESRB RP | Format GBA, GC, PC, PS2, Xbox

BREAKDOWN

Graphics		8
Sound		7
Gameplay		8
Story		7
Replay Value		7



Urban street racing has been in the spotlight since movies like *The Fast and the Furious* and games like *Midnight Club* have captured the masses. Now one of the tried-and-true driving franchises, *Need for Speed* is grabbing on to the trend with *Underground*.

The game picks up all aspects of street racing, including tricking out your import rides, drag racing, street racing, and let's not forget the attitude and "street cred." With licenses from auto manufacturers and aftermarket parts, *Underground* lets you soup up your ride with the fastest and coolest accessories. This attention to detail makes *Underground* interesting for a little while.

Need for Speed has been around for years, and has modified itself from outrunning the cops to being the cops, and back again. The series is starting to show its age. The element of urban street racing might be the high-octane injection that is needed to keep the engines running on this series, but neon lights and cool paint jobs don't really make the series that much better.

— Enid Burns



The Sims: Makin' Magic

They're not talking about the bedroom

Publisher Electronic Arts | Developer Maxis | Genre Simulation | ESRB T | Format PC

The Sims: Makin' Magic—er, *Magic*, is the sixth and, according to Electronic Arts and Maxis, the final expansion pack for the most popular PC game of all time. We find it fascinating and depressing that legendary designer Will Wright apparently had a hell of a time selling EA on the concept of *The Sims* despite his amazing track record, but the game has made a huge statement and the suits have taken notice with their much fatter bank accounts.

As with the previous packs, *MM* introduces a load of new features, including a new town (Magic Town, of course), a new kitchen set (including an oven in which you can cook breads, pies, and cakes), new characters (Gypsy vendors and a Faerie Queen, among others), and over 175 new items (walls, skins, etc.). *Sims* junkies will surely snap up *MM* in record numbers, as they have every other *Sims* expansion pack, which is a testament to the ingeniousness of Wright.

Here's the thing, though. While it's a cute idea, *Makin' Magic* violates what makes *The Sims* so interesting to begin with: its uniquely twisted

BREAKDOWN

Graphics	//////	7
Sound	//////	7
Gameplay	//////	7
Story		N/A
Replay Value	//////	7



interpretation of real life. In this particular game-world—if you consider *The Sims* a game instead of a toy, and many people don't—magic takes away from the fun. Then again, previous packs have explored virtually every aspect of life that wasn't touched upon in the original game, so delving into the fantastic was about the only remaining option. Either that, or ship *The Sims 2* a little sooner. Ahem.

—Zach Meston



Spawn: Armageddon

Al Simmons has a problem

Publisher Namco | Developer Namco, Point Of View | Genre Action | ESRB RP | Format GC, PS2, Xbox

BREAKDOWN

Graphics	//////	7
Sound	//////	6
Gameplay	//////	6
Story	//////	6
Replay Value	//////	5



Todd McFarlane's signature hero has taken a big fall from his glory days in the 1990s, so it's fitting that *Spawn: Armageddon* isn't at the top of the action heap. The demon formerly known as Al Simmons has the monumental task of saving the earth from rogue angels bent on the destruction of hell, though he himself is enlisted as a Hellspawn.

This is a third-person action festival that puts all the old tricks to work in 23 levels of fairly repetitive hack-and-slash action. A variety of projectile Hell powers are at your disposal, along with a SWAT van's worth of real-world firepower. A gigantic axe is always at the ready, and then there are the chains. As a default infinite-ammo attack, the chains can suspend attackers in air before tearing them apart. Not bad at all.

The colorful graphics certainly have their comic-book origins in mind, and they almost

live up to expectations. If only more attention had been paid to the animations, *Spawn* would be a much more compelling game.

As is, those chains look a bit flat, and most of the characters move with a decidedly animatronic gait. Holding down the Jump button unfurls a tremendous red cape, which is great as a glider, but not so hot as a graphical showcase. Rooms full of destructible items are welcome, but many of the effects interfere with the gameplay.

An atmospheric score does its best to offset the graphical deficiencies, but even this suffers under the occasional blare of nu-metal. If *Golden Axe* is hallowed ground to you, by all means dive into *Armageddon*. Otherwise, wait for the rapture or stick to the HBO animated series.

—Russ Fincher



XIII

Cartoons and guns

Publisher **UbiSoft** | Developer **UbiSoft** | Genre **FPS** | ESRB **M** | Format **GC, PC, PS2, Xbox**

Gratuitous violence is good. Looting corpses also makes us smile. Leave it to UbiSoft to play off these themes and tempt our baser natures with *XIII*, the world's first FPS with graphic novel aesthetics.

Awaking as an amnesiac assassin, you'll slay almost everything that moves. As a pure action game, the title satisfies, with multiple weapons ranging from throwing knives to machine guns and crossbows, all of which are drawn in a starkly visceral way. Pop-up blurbs and comic panels laden with blood-soaked content convey key plot points, present crucial information, and let you get amusing close-ups of enemies who've taken crossbow bolts to the head.

But while the title's audio-visual trappings are unique, the gameplay proves much more hackneyed. Sample mission goals: defend allies like Carrington or Major Jones (voiced by hip-hop sensation Eve), restore power to cable car installations, and escape dry dock loading zones. Yawn. We can't say we're overly fond of the control scheme, either. It makes swapping between weapons and items a tedious affair.

Sheer charisma carries the day, however. For a bizarre concept based on an obscure Belgian comic, the game sports considerable personality. We can only hope the software engine employed here can be used to better effect in future projects.

Judged on overall merits, *XIII* is an enjoyable but

sadly limited game. As a rental, fans should eat it up. Unfortunately, long-term play value remains questionable, though the Xbox Live-enabled multiplayer version will satisfy some.

—Scott Steinberg

BREAKDOWN

Graphics	██████████	8
Sound	██████████	7
Gameplay	██████████	7
Story	██████████	7
Replay Value	██████████	6



Rogue Ops

Sam Fisher's long lost sister

Publisher Kemco | Developer Bits Studios | Genre Stealth Action | ESRB M | Format GC, PS2, Xbox

If you're going to enter a genre dominated by *Metal Gear Solid 2* and *Splinter Cell*, you'd damned well better bring something new to the table—and *Rogue Ops* does, its best despite its small development house and low-profile publisher.

Rogue Ops has a female protagonist, the ex-Green Beret Nikki Connors. This is hardly a big deal, but as the original designers of *Tomb Raider* once said, "If you're going to spend an entire game staring at a character, it might as well be an attractive one." We're not saying Sam Fisher isn't a ruggedly handsome man, but this blonde comes much closer to being eye candy.

With the unique control system, a single button controls many of the character's actions. To jump and grab a ledge, for example, you "look" at the top of the ledge and press the button. Stealth kills require some skill; instead of tapping a button, you have to quickly input a series of analog-stick moves before you're discovered.

The game has a distinct lack of production values: average graphics, mundane sound,

and wretched voice acting. *Rogue Ops* is unquestionably a second-string stealth game, but it makes the most of its unique elements and solid level design to warrant a rent.

—Zach Meston

BREAKDOWN

Graphics	////	5
Sound	////	4
Gameplay	////////	7
Story	////////	6
Replay Value	///	3



Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles

Turtle Power failure

Publisher Konami | Developer Konami | Genre Action | ESRB E | Format GBA, GC, PC, PS2, Xbox

The stars of Konami's all-new animated brawler should be instantly recognizable. Onetime 1980s celebrities, the heroic four-man troupe known as the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles is back in business, although, unfortunately, time hasn't treated the former icons well.

Some 15 years after the franchise first debuted as a videogame, the formula remains unchanged. Play involves one to two participants choosing a character—Michelangelo, Leonardo, Donatello, or Raphael—then braining enemies senseless, including wayward teens, Foot Clan thugs, mouser robots, and beastly bosses.

Cel-shaded visuals, combo hits, juggles, and 3D scrolling are welcome innovations, but they can't disguise the glaring truth: The action is as repetitive and uninvolved as it was back when you were sporting glow-in-the-dark Keds. The main difference between the current contender and yesteryear's version? Most of the product's core audience has grown up enough to feel completely disconnected from the protagonists.

As a kid-friendly spin-off of the Fox TV series and throwback to a gentler era, the product may satisfy. Attractive aural and graphical assets will delight, as should—for twentysomethings at least—run-ins with familiar face like Baxter Stockman. The game isn't awful, just severely underwhelming. Lame special moves and

too many repeat encounters with the same foe signal just the tip of the iceberg.

Like most childhood fantasies, it's worth indulging in briefly, but eventually even the hardest nostalgia buff has to move on.

—Scott Steinberg

BREAKDOWN

Graphics		8
Sound		7
Gameplay		6
Story		6
Replay Value		6



Star Trek: Shattered Universe

Set your phasers to "suck"

Publisher TDK Mediactive | Developer StarSphere Interactive | Genre Simulation | ESRB RP | Format PS2, Xbox

With Activision recently filing a bizarre breach-of-contract lawsuit against Paramount for allowing the *Star Trek* franchise to "stagnate and decay," *Shattered Universe* is probably the last *Trek* game we'll see for a long while—and it's a disappointing way to send the series into the Neutral Zone.

Shattered Universe is a relentlessly mediocre outer-space shooter that would be instantly forgettable without the *Trek* tie-in. We now understand why this game spent a year and a half seeking a new publisher after Interplay dumped it back in 2001.

The game takes place in the alternate universe depicted in the original-series episode "Mirror, Mirror," which gives the developers some room to play with unique ship designs and unusual plot twists. All of the classic *Trek* ships are included; the game even gets the requisite Enterprise sighting out of the way in the first of its 19 extremely linear missions. You don't actually control starships in the game; instead you're relegated to the much smaller fighter spacecraft.

The small ships are disappointing at first, but they serve the well-intentioned purpose of keeping the arcade-like gameplay fast paced.

Shattered Universe's graphics betray its creakiness; the polygon counts are low, the backgrounds are blurry, and the special effects are weak.

Meanwhile, the music is depressingly bland, although the sound is bolstered by the extensive voiceover work of George "Sulu" Takei and Walter "Chekov" Koenig, who apparently managed to drag themselves away from the convention circuit for a couple of days to lay down some tracks.

Some licensed games are appealing regardless of (or despite) the properties on which they're based, but *Shattered Universe* is appealing only because it's *Star Trek*; if you don't know your mind-melds from your nerve pinches, keep this game at light year's distance.

—Zach Meston

BREAKDOWN

Graphics	///	3
Sound	////	6
Gameplay	////	5
Story	////	6
Replay Value	///	3



Bird's Eye View

He's not just the namesake of *Tony Hawk's Underground*. He's a living, breathing person, just like you. If you were the best skater ever.

The new game, *Tony Hawk's Underground*, is very different from the *Pro Skater* games. Why the change?

We—Neversoft, Activision, and I—felt like it was time to mix things up. We also wanted to keep the skating genre fresh and unpredictable.

What, for you, are the coolest things about the new game?

I enjoy the story line and experiencing the realities of trying to make it as a pro skater. You don't just start off as a pro, as you did in previous games, you have to earn everything to make it there. Putting yourself in the game with the new face-mapping feature and the create-a-trick and create-a-goal features are also amazing.

Given that the new game is career oriented, do you think someone could use it to become a pro?

In some ways. They will definitely see the types of hardships and expectations one has in trying to make a career out of skateboarding. There will be some plot twists that are a little exaggerated, though, just to keep it challenging.

Are there any pros who can kick your butt at your own game?

The only pro to ever beat me was Jamie Thomas, right when the first *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* was released. He had just gone through knee surgery, so he spent his downtime playing the game. He tried to teach me the Holy Shit Grind, but I couldn't stay balanced around the hip. I became a much better player through *THPS2* and 3, and now I can take him down.

Can your kids kick your butt at it yet?

No, but my oldest son, who is ten, is starting to develop his skills, so it won't be long now.

Are there fans of your game franchise who don't even know you're an actual skater?

About two years ago I got an e-mail that said exactly that. "I'm looking for information on a skateboarder named Tony Hawk, but I have come to find out that he is merely a video game character. Please clarify this for me." Well, he's been seen hanging out with Lara Croft and Tony Vercetti in *MarioWorld*. Good luck finding him.

—Paul Semel





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PlayStation®2



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